DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 501 CS 510 719

TITLE	Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (84th, Washington, DC, August 5-8, 2001). Religion and Media Interest Group.
INSTITUTION	Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.
PUB DATE	2001-08-00
NOTE	100p.; For other sections of the 2001 proceedings, see CS 510 704-724.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Proceedings (021)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Higher Education; *Journalism Education; Legal Problems; *News Writing; Newspapers; *Religion; *Religious Factors
IDENTIFIERS	*Christian Science; Frame Analysis; *Media Coverage

ABSTRACT

The Religion and Media Interest Group section of the proceedings contains the following 4 selected papers: "'Where All Things Are Pure and of Good Report': The Doctrinal Theology, Religious Practice, and Media Manipulation of the Christian Science Church" (Douglas J. Swanson); "Religion and Topoi in the News: An Analysis of the 'Unsecular Media' Hypothesis" (Rick Clifton Moore); "Gone Fishin': A Framing Analysis of the Fight over a Small Town's City Seal" (Mark Paxton); and "'Jesus Sends Dolphins To Save Cuban Child': How the Press Played the 'God Angle' in the Elian Gonzalez Story" (Susan Willey). (RS)

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Religion & Media

'Where all things are pure and of good report':
The Doctrinal Theology, Religious Practice, and Media Manipulation of the Christian Science Church

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Running head: CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

'Where all things are pure and of good report':

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Abstract

The Church of Christ, Scientist, is a 21st century religious movement that is facing considerable challenges to its existence on many fronts. The church is morally bound to the unalterable religious theology of its 19th century founder, Mary Baker Eddy. The church is legally obligated to an intractable management structure Mrs. Eddy proscribed in the church Manual. For more than a century, church leadership has been able to follow Mrs. Eddy's example and successfully manipulate the media to control dissemination of information about the church's theology and practice. At the same time, the church has presented a pleasing public image of "rectitude and spiritual understanding" (Eddy, 1906, p. 403). But recent financial crises and legal action against the church have generated unprecedented dissent, both inside and outside Christian Science. Examining how church leadership is struggling to address current issues with its 19th century frameworks could be indicative of the future success or failure of the Christian Science movement.

> My heart has many rooms: one of these is sacred to the memory of my students. Into this upper chamber, where all things are pure and of good report, — into this sanctuary of love, — I often retreat, sit silently, and ponder. (Eddy, 1924, p. 159)

Introduction

The Church of Christ, Scientist, better known as the Christian Science Church, is a worldwide religious organization established in Boston, Mass., in 1879 by Mary Baker Eddy to "reinstate primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing" (Eddy, 1936, p. 17). The church was founded as part of Mrs. Eddy's quest to present biblical truths she credited for her physical and moral salvation after a life-threatening accident in 1866. The theology of Christian Science is built around Mrs. Eddy's book, Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, first published in 1875. Science and Health serves as Scientists' legitimizing guide for life. It assigns reality – and denies reality – according to Mrs. Eddy's understandings.

> Christian Science sustains with immortal proof the impossibility of any material sense, and defines these so-called senses as *mortal beliefs*, the testimony of which cannot be true either of man or of his Maker. (Eddy, 1906, p. 488, italics in the original)

At its most basic level, the theology of Christian Science demands that followers maintain "an almost constant state of denial" to actions and events of the physical world (Kramer, 2000). It is expected that a practicing Scientist will study Science and Health daily and memorize significant passages to build a defense against the worldly thinking which is believed to precipitate sin, disease, and death.

In practice, the leadership of the church adheres to rules established by Mrs. Eddy's subsequent work, Manual of the Mother Church, first published in 1895. The Manual contains a legally intractable, eternally unchangeable structure for church administration, the content of worship services, requirements for membership, and other individual and collective requirements for believers.

Together, the books known by followers simply as 'the textbook' and 'the manual' outline a system of worship which has been characterized as "a pragmatic interpretation of Christian revelation" (Gottschalk, 1973, p. 275) because its focus is on practicality of purpose. Christian Science was developed to support those who "wished to cling to cherished values and ideals in a rapidly changing America" of the 19th century (Thomas, 1994, p. 295)

and it retains its focus today. The religion uses a rhetorical strategy Kramer calls "the absolute in the relative" (2000, p. 186). It allows followers to address worldly concerns while denying all reality of existence to those concerns.

Problem

> "Stand porter at the door of thought. Admitting only such conclusions as you wish realized in bodily results, you will control yourself harmoniously." (Eddy, 1906, p. 391)

Recognizing the inflexibility of Christian Science theology and practice, humorist Mark Twain wrote that Scientists had no more say in the management of their church than audience members would have in the management of a theater (Twain, 1907). This has been a commonly expressed complaint since the beginning of the movement. Over the years, dissident Scientists have criticized church leadership for denying church members the right to revise doctrine, engage in debate, or openly publish literature not approved by the church.

For more than a hundred years, church leadership has kept most of these grievances out of the public spotlight by manipulating media content about Christian Science and controlling believers' access to publications which address church theology. Church leadership has methodically acquired as much historical documentation as possible about Christian Science (Silberger, 1980), restricted access to this collection (Gill, 1998), and has threatened malcontents with excommunication or legal action if they oppose the policies (Beals, 2000a; Fraser, 1999). These strategies, together with an army of local observers feeding "vital intelligence" back to church headquarters in Boston (Brenneman, 1990, p. 69) has kept most dissent private. But, beginning in the 1980s, as membership continued to drop and Christian Science was identified as "a graying, dwindling religion" (Brenneman, 1990, p. 77), the church found its public position threatened on a number of fronts.

A financial and management crisis almost bankrupted The Mother Church (Fraser, 1999) and forced the sale of church broadcast units at a huge financial loss. In order to qualify for a huge financial gift, the church authorized publication of a biography which deifies Mrs. Eddy and is seen by many Scientists as "blasphemous" (Fraser, 1999, p. 371). Church leadership was named in a spate of lawsuits accusing The Mother Church of responsibility in connection with the deaths of children who died while under Christian Science prayer treatment.

Numerous break-away groups surfaced to openly challenge the authority of The Mother Church, its interpretation of Christian Science theology, and leadership's control of written work about the faith.

As these controversies developed, church leadership found it could no longer fall back on traditional censorship strategies that Kramer summarized as "quiet attempts to silence opposition" (Kramer, 2000, p. 100). The international news media focused voluminous attention on the church's troubles, and Christian Science dissenters found numerous opportunities to unite and share their complaints through traditional media and via the World Wide Web.

As a result, Mrs. Eddy's church is faced today with innumerable threats its founder did not foresee. These threats are growing in number and complexity. The church needs to present a positive image to the public, stabilize its financial footing, re-energize its organizational structure, add new members, and stem a rising tide of branch church closings. But because the church's theology and practice cannot be adapted to changing expectations of a contemporary world, it is difficult to imagine how the church will address the challenges it faces.

Investigation

This research uses the case study method to illustrate the heretofore unexplored relationship between the religious theology and practice of the Church of Christ, Scientist, and the practice of media manipulation used by its leadership. The investigation is pertinent because church leadership is obligated to adhere to an intransient theology which is more than a century old. The church organizational structure, hierarchy, and worship guidelines are equally unalterable and dated. Scholars who have studied the movement contend it is out of step with the expectations of contemporary society (Kramer, 2000; Fraser, 1999; Brenneman, 1990). At the very least, Mrs. Eddy's strategies for dealing with critical newspaper editorials of the 1800s can hardly be considered applicable for issues management in the multi-media environment in which Christian Science must now promote and defend itself. Examining how church leadership addresses these and other 21st century issues with Mrs. Eddy's 19th century frameworks could be indicative of the future success or failure of the Christian Science movement.

The case study method has been chosen because it is consistent with qualitative investigation in the social sciences and in business (Stake, 1995). The method is advantageous because "an entire organization or entity can

be investigated in depth and with meticulous attention to detail" (Zikmund, 1997, p. 108). Case study research addresses relationships among individuals, entities and functions while taking into account professional culture and expectations (Becher, 1989). The method allows for a problem to be told in story form, addressing actual events and opportunities for decision-making (Megginson, 1980). It allows the scholar to translate experience into concepts which can then be used as a decision-making guide in similar situations in the future (Hoag, Brickley, & Cawley, 2001).

The current study of Christian Science is qualitative in nature. It was carried out to make broad general observations about Christian Science, the leadership of the church, and opportunities for future growth of Christian Science as a religious organization. It first examines Christian Science theology, to see how Mrs. Eddy's puritan upbringing allowed her "to quite literally institutionalize her personality" in her church and its belief system (Brenneman, 1990, p. 43). The focus then shifts to Christian Science practice, to see how the church conducts its business and regulates social activity of its membership. Efforts by church leadership to enforce solidarity among the faithful are discussed. The study then summarizes successes and failures of church leadership in regard to prior restraint and censorship of Christian Science theological literature, and manipulation of other media content about the religion and its followers. The study ends with a discussion of recent positive developments and future challenges.

Doctrinal theology

All individual and group activity of Christian Scientists is regulated by the theological tenets contained in Science and Health. The book was published initially in 1875 and revised dozens of times during Mrs. Eddy's lifetime. The final edition was published in 1906. Mrs. Eddy makes it clear in Science and Health and in her other works that Christian Scientists must have "radical reliance" (1936, p. 167) on the its truths the textbook contains. Scientists are also expected to know they "must follow Mrs. Eddy's teachings without addition or deviation" (Kramer, 2000, p. 24) and that her words carry as much weight today as they did when she was alive.

The textbook

As with the rest of Mrs. Eddy's writings, the textbook is both detailed and vague in wording and intent. Comprised of more than 700 pages, the book deliberately lays out Mrs. Eddy's thoughts on prayer, marriage,

medicine, and "mental malpractice" – "the injurious action of one mortal mind controlling another from wrong motives" (1906, p. 451). It ends with a glossary of terms, a "Key to the Scriptures" interpreting biblical passages according to Christian Science theology, and dozens of testimonies from 19th century students healed of gout, rheumatism, consumption, and other maladies of the time period.

Though detailed in subject, the book focuses more on the 'why' than the 'how to' of Christian Science practice. A 14-page chapter on marriage, for example, includes no discussion of dispute resolution, family planning, household finances, or sex. To be specific about such topics would be contrary to the philosophy of filtering out the material elements of the world and replacing them with spiritual interpretations (Kramer, 2000).

Testimonies of healing

It is not uncommon for people of any religious background who claim to have been healed by prayer to talk about their experiences (Dossey, 1993). But the experiences of Christian Scientists are unique because the religion's primary focus as an entity is physical healing. In fact, Mrs. Eddy makes healing conditional for "any sincere seeker of Truth" (1906, p. x). Therefore, testimonies of healing are a key element of Christian Science theology, a 'litmus test' of the spirituality of its followers, and the main link between Christian Science theology and practice.

Testimonies of Christian Science healing are published in the periodicals, spoken privately among Scientists, and voiced publicly in Wednesday testimony meetings. Testimonies provide confirmation for Scientists that vanquished diseases and illnesses were "unreal" to begin with (Eddy, 1924, p. 12) and that even the thought of discord cannot exist in a reality where "God is All-in-all" (Eddy, 1936, p. 468).

Testimonies are almost always "anecdotal" in nature (DesAutels, Battin, & May, 1999, p. 3), frame the healing as a 'challenge overcome,' and cite the event as evidence of the believer's spiritual authority over a material reality that seemed to be but was not. Testimonies do not detail medical diagnosis, symptoms, or suffering because to do so would be to admit facts of a discordant reality vehemently denied by Christian Science theology. Scientists do not testify about any healing with resulted from a combination of prayer with medical methods because Mrs. Eddy declared that in most situations "[t]he hypotheses of mortals are antagonistic to Science and cannot mix with it. (Eddy, 1936, p. 182). Nevertheless, even Mrs. Eddy recognized that some medical conditions

would not expediently be dealt with through prayer. "Until the advancing age admits the efficacy and supremacy of Mind," she wrote, "it is better for Christian Scientists to leave surgery and the adjustment of broken bones and dislocations to the fingers of a surgeon, while the mental healer confines himself chiefly to mental reconstruction and to the prevention of inflammation" (1936, p. 401). In any event, to Christian Scientists, testimonies of healing allow the sharing of their deliverance from "a dominant medical paradigm" which when unchecked can allow followers "to catch society's fear and concern" about disease and, by association, create its reality (DesAutels, Battin, & May, 1999, p. 45).

Testimonies have their own positive and uplifting rhetoric. An illness or diseases is a 'suggestion,' a 'challenge,' or at the very worst, a 'problem' which comes from 'moral mind.' The Christian Scientist does not call attention to a condition, and in most cases will not refer to it by name. When the condition is successfully healed, a 'demonstration' has taken place. Failure is not acknowledged. A healing delayed is only evidence that the believer has not yet 'worked things out.' A Christian Scientist who dies as a result of a medical complication 'had a problem he/she could not overcome.'

Typically, the devout Christian Scientist personally identifies with the healing that brought him or her to the fold of the faithful, and will re-tell the story regularly to other Scientists and to non-believers. Consistent with Mrs. Eddy's own testimony of healing from 1866, the testimony of modern-day believers is a conversion experience which almost always follows the same pattern: An instantaneous or almost instantaneous healing of a disease, illness, or injury rendered 'incurable' by traditional medical experts, as the result of the initially doubtful victim's reading of all or part of Science and Health (See Kramer, 2000; Fraser, 1999). As a result, the theology of Christian Scientists and the organizational practice of their church is regulated by- and through testimonies of healing – just as the theology and organizational practice of other religious groups is regulated by- and through their rhetoric and organizational rituals (Sass, 2000; Appelrouth, 1999; Dehler & Welsh, 1994; Neck & Millman, 1994).

Religious practice

> All successful individuals have become such by hard work; by improving moments before they pass into hours, and hours that other people may occupy in the pursuit of pleasure. They spend no time in sheer idleness, in talking when they have nothing to say, in building aircastles or floating off on the wings of sense: all of which drop human life into the ditch of nonsense, and worse than waste its years (Eddy, 1924, p. 230).

When Christian Science burst on the scene at the close of the Civil War, the attractiveness of Mrs. Eddy's philosophy allowed her to quickly build the nation's fastest-growing religious movement (Gill, 1998). Many of the most prominent Americans, including socialites, politicians, and entertainers were among the faithful.

Focused and determined, strong in organizational skill and with "a genius for fund-raising" (Gill, 1998, p. 469), Mrs. Eddy spent little time socializing and in fact was often "inaccessible to anyone except members of her household and her selected church officials" (Gill, 1998, p. 350). She was constantly at work, writing and revising her publications and building a foundation for her religious movement. As a result, Mary Baker Eddy's displayed personality and work ethic is, now and forever, the model for Christian Scientists.

Faithful workers

Mrs. Eddy felt that an appropriate follower of Christian Science "gives little time to society manners or matters, and benefits society by his example and usefulness" (Eddy, 1900, p. 2). This philosophy is reflected by a church organization which has no paid clergy and no church-sanctioned social functions or charitable causes.

The order and content of Christian Science church services are dictated by the Manual. Sunday services are conducted by lay 'readers' who read selections from the Bible and Science and Health. Selections are chosen by The Mother Church based on a revolving set of topics selected by Mrs. Eddy. All citations read are identical in all branch churches each Sunday, and no elaboration or extemporaneous speaking is authorized. The Manual establishes specific time limits for music, and allows only a piano or organ accompaniment. Audience members remain silent except during hymns and reader-led audible prayer. Presumably because of the sedate nature of the services, Christian Scientists are discouraged from bringing children to church. Children are welcomed at Sunday

School, which has classes for youth through age 20. Wednesday evening meetings include selected readings followed by healing testimonials offered by audience members.

Each Christian Science church will employ a clerk, a treasurer, and occasionally will have service positions for others. Outside the church, Mrs. Eddy allowed for a small number of 'professional' Christian Scientists who are allowed to carry out specific service occupations but are not employed by the church. These professionals include Christian Science practitioners, who work full- or part-time and offer prayer healing services for a fee as an alternative to medical care. Practitioners are not allowed to diagnose illnesses, offer medication, or provide any type of physical comfort. When an ailing Christian Scientist needs additional care, a Christian Science nurse may be called in to bathe the patient, dress wounds, or assist in making the sufferer more comfortable, as long as no medications are being used. Seriously ill Christian Scientists are welcomed to rest and pray at private Christian Science nursing home facilities.

Church membership

Scientists who confess their faith and secure written recommendations from other members may join a branch church at age 12, following an oral interview and an affirmative vote of the membership. Branch church members may also join The Mother Church, provided they secure similar endorsement and are approved by a vote of the Board.

While it is somewhat difficult to get into the membership, it is very easy to get out. The Manual painstakingly lists 83 different requirements and prohibitions for members. Requirements include daily prayer and study of the Bible and Science and Health, payment of an annual tax to the church, and purchase of subscriptions to church periodicals.

Social prohibitions

The Manual's guidelines prohibit the Church of Christ, Scientist, from having any of the social activities which are a traditional part of American protestant church life. No parties are held. No meals are served. There are no prayer groups, sewing circles, or youth activities. There are no baptisms, weddings, or funerals. With the exception of the occasional business assembly or committee meeting, Scientists do not gather at their churches other than for worship. What social activity does exist for Christian Scientists is outside the church structure and is

focused through, and constrained by, the interrelationships of the religion's textbook and stories of physical healing.

Enforced loyalties

Throughout the history of the movement, there have been concerns that "quick, effective, convincing activist-converts might lead the Church off into new directions of their own contriving; even, perhaps that they might move her Church right out from under Mrs. Eddy" (Silberger, 1980, p. 186). For that reason, the Board enforces trust and solidarity of the faithful through a variety of individual and collective tests of loyalty. All are in keeping with the organization's style of quiet, behind-the-scenes manipulation.

One of the most important events in the developmental history of the Church of Christ, Scientist, took place between 1919 and 1921. What Scientists call The Great Litigation was a power struggle between the Board of Directors and the Trustees. Because the Board was not given specific power-sharing directives in the Manual, the Board attempted to gain organizational power by forcing the Publishing Society to acknowledge Board authority in greater ways. As part of its strategy, the Board carried out a collective test of member loyalty by asking Christian Scientists to cancel their subscriptions to church publications (Kramer, 2000). Church members who refused were quickly branded as disloyal to the cause. In some cases, they were shunned by other church members. After the Massachusetts Supreme Court ended the dispute by ruling in favor of the Board, the Board mailed a questionnaire to Christian Science Journal-listed practitioners, requiring that they disclose whether or not they were loyal to the board during the years of legal turmoil. Practitioners identified as loyal to the Board were allowed to renew their professional listings.

During the upheavals at The Mother Church in the 1980s and 90s, a time characterized by Fraser as "a massive institutional nervous breakdown" (1999, p. 394), church leadership conducted further collective tests of loyalty. The church was ""[i]n desperate need of money" (Kramer, 2000, p. 31) as a result of the leveraging of pension funds to establish a radio and television broadcast network. The network failed, its equipment was sold at a tremendous financial loss (Nieber, 2000), and church leadership ended up defending itself against a lawsuit filed by members who claimed $450 million was "recklessly and wrongfully" spent in the endeavor. As a consequence of the lawsuit, some critical Mother Church staff were fired and others excommunicated (Fraser, 1999). The

church clerk "personally contacted those suspected by the Board of subversive activities and officially rebuked them for not being supportive" (Fraser, 1999, p. 374).

'Authorized' publications

The Christian Science Publishing Society publishes all religious periodicals of the church, including the Christian Science Journal, Christian Science Sentinel, bible lesson booklets known as the Quarterly, and other publications in a variety of languages. The Publishing Society also publishes all of Mrs. Eddy's manuscript works.

It is the position of church leadership that only these 'authorized' publications should be marketed to represent Christian Science. The leadership bases its authority claim on an a written request made to the church by Mrs. Eddy in the final year of her life. In response to inquiries about other publications, Mrs. Eddy wrote: "I recommend nothing but what is published or sold by The Christian Science Publishing Society" (Eddy, 1924, p. 354). Upon Mrs. Eddy's death, the Board of Directors legally acquired all copyright protections for her published and unpublished works. Those works which the leadership wished to remain in circulation were offered for sale in Christian Science Reading Rooms. The other works were deposited in the inaccessible archives of The Mother Church. The leadership staunchly defends its prior restraint protections, helped in great measure by a legal extension of copyright which was shepherded to approval during the Nixon administration by Christian Scientist H.R. (Bob) Haldeman.

Those who oppose the policy of leadership argue that the recommendation of April, 1909, was not a blanket indictment of outside works, but instead resulted from specific incidents in which Mrs. Eddy's name was used to promote sales of outside publications. This argument is further supported by a July, 1891 admonishment by Mrs. Eddy. Published on a card which was inserted into issues of the Christian Science Journal, it reads: "I consider my students as capable, individually, of selecting their own reading material and circulating it, as a committee would be which is chosen for this purpose" (Eddy, as quoted in Beals, 2000a, p. 9). But because this card was inserted into the magazines and not published in text, it has been lost from many collections and many Scientists are said to be unaware of its existence.

In practice, the general legal counsel for the Board contacts writers and publishers directly to prevent them from creating works not approved by the Publishing Society. Beals characterizes the activity as "Boston's

untiring effort to control the members through depriving them of the deeper teachings that enabled them to better understand and demonstrate Christian Science" (2000a, p. 11). The effort is polite, but firm (Swanson, 1997) and is based on a simple fact: Christian Science teachings cannot be expressed in any detail without quoting Mrs. Eddy. Since the Board of Directors owns and houses all her published and unpublished works, rigidly restricts access and defends its copyright ownership, writers who wish to quote Mrs. Eddy without the Board's approval must do so illegally and at their own risk. Some authors who have gone to press with unauthorized works have been released from Publishing Society authorized literature writing assignments and forced to remove their professional listings from the Journal. Others have been excommunicated (Beals, 2000a).

Debate

The Mother Church employs a small number of Board-approved spokespersons known as Christian Science Lecturers. These men and women travel the world and speak publicly about the religion and its benefits. It is usually expected that each branch church will host at least one lecture annually. Often these gatherings are held in other public accommodations to boost attendance. While lecturers will promote Christian Science, they never engage in debate about it, as per the Manual.

Within the past ten years, church leadership based in Boston began participating in secular and ecumenical religious conferences to explain Christian Science in its broader social contexts. By all indications, presentations have been explanatory in nature and have not violated the Manual's stipulations about debate. Reports of the proceedings have been carried in the Journal and other church periodicals.

Media Manipulation

The Publishing Society manipulates media content about Christian Science primarily through the Committees on Publication (COPs). These groups work locally to promote Christian Science, defend it from attack, censor critical commentary, gather information for the Mother Church, and raise funds to support legal battles. There are 52 COPs in the U.S. and more than a hundred overseas, and at least one member of each branch church participates.

In keeping with Mrs. Eddy's "standard of acceptability" (Silberger, 1980, p. 232) the COPs intervene to keep news coverage about Christian Science informative, uplifting and positive. The COPs monitor the news media and react to provide denials or corrections in accordance with Mrs. Eddy's demands in the Manual.

> It shall be the duty of the Committee on Publication to correct in a Christian manner impositions on the public in regard to Christian Science, injustices done Mrs. Eddy or members of this Church by the daily press, by periodicals or circulated literature of any sort. . . Furthermore, the Committee on Publication shall read the *last proof sheet* of such an article and see that it is published according to copy; he shall circulate in large quantities the papers containing such an article, sending a copy to the Clerk of the Church. (Eddy, 1936, p. 97, italics in the original)

At the same time, COPs work pro-actively to keep unpleasant information out of the media whenever possible. In an instance cited by Brenneman (1990), a COP member working with a practitioner successfully persuaded a newspaper reporter covering a sexual abuse case not to report that the accused was a Christian Science Sunday School teacher. The male defendant had been arrested and charged with sexually abusing and photographing young children. Thanks to the persuasive effort on the part of church officials, the newspaper stories did not mention the suspect's religion or church involvement.

COPs also attempt to influence the media by working through the Publishing Society's Committee on Business. This committee "uses advertiser 'muscle' to intimidate editors and publishers" (Brenneman, 1990, p. 73). The result is a two-pronged effort to influence media content journalistically and economically.

COPs also help raise money from the faithful to fund legal battles by parents whose children have died while under Christian Science prayer treatment – an increasingly large task, since there have been dozens of such cases in recent years (Kramer, 2000; DesAutels, Battin & May, 1999; Brenneman, 1990). Because of this and other work that goes on behind the scenes, COPs are seen as "the most powerful figures in the church in many respects" (Brenneman, 1990, p. 69).

New media

By early 2001, there were at least ten organizations offering Christian Science-like religious services, evangelizing in the name of Christian Science, publicizing Mrs. Eddy's works and writing, or selling unauthorized

literature about Christian Science. Some of the groups promote theology which appears consistent with that of The Mother Church, but the groups differ with Boston on leadership and doctrinal control issues. Other groups promote theology which is at odds with that of The Mother Church's interpretation of Mrs. Eddy's Christian Science.

Several of these organizations have detailed World Wide Web sites and appear to use these sites as the basis for theological promotion and circulation of publications. Appearances give some indication that the Board and the Publishing Society are trying to prevent the electronic publication of religious materials by these organizations, but the extent of this interference is difficult to verify.

Perhaps the most well-known of the theologically consistent dissident groups is The Bookmark, a California-based operation established in 1980 which offers a catalog of Christian Science literature. Its Web site states that the publications include "familiar works of Mrs. Eddy, many reminiscences, memoirs of early workers, lectures, Biblical study aids, and other items of interest" (The Bookmark, 2001). A printed catalog offers bound works, including bound photocopied reprints of out of print books. The Bookmark claims adherence to traditional Christian Science theology but strongly disagrees with church leadership's exclusive publication and control of its so-called authorized works. Founder Ann Beals, in a letter to customers, reported that she had been accused by the Board of copyright infringement for selling copies of out of print literature about Christian Science. Beals "agreed to the Church's request to remove these writings from my website and my publication list until I could determine what steps to take in meeting this challenge" (Beals, 2000b). Her letter seeks donations for a legal defense fund.

At least two other organizations whose beliefs appear to be theologically-consistent with The Mother Church also reported legal challenges from the Board. The Modesto, California-based Christian Science University claims to offer 56 online degree programs, all based on Christian Science theology and practice. David James Nolan, who identifies himself as chancellor of the institution, states that his goal to establish an institution of higher learning to coordinate education with Christian Science practice is being jeopardized by threatened legal action for use of the trademarked term "Christian Science" (The Christian Science University, 2001).

One of Nolan's former associates is Helen Marie Wright, founder of The Mary Baker Eddy Institute. This organization publishes pamphlets and audio tape lectures which also appear mostly consistent with Christian Science theology. It also offers more than a dozen books profiling Mrs. Eddy or criticizing church leadership. The

Institute claims that the 88th edition of Mrs. Eddy's Manual was the last version she authorized. It seeks to have this version legally "acknowledged as law by law" (Mary Baker Eddy Institute, 2001), an action which the organization claims would free the branch churches from Boston's control, allowing them to be self-governed. The Institute is soliciting donations for its Mary Baker Eddy Obedience Fund to engage its legal challenge to the authority of The Mother Church, and to defend against legal threats by the Board for use of Mary Baker Eddy's name (Mary Baker Eddy Institute, 2001).

Other organizations claim fidelity to some of the official theology of Christian Science, but differ with other aspects of the religion as proselytized in Science and Health and structured in the Manual. Among these groups is the Christian Science Endtime Center of Denver, Colorado. Established in 1995, the Endtime Center is supported by the Christian Science Church of Transfiguration, which adheres to the belief that at some future point people will be transfigured into spiritual beings as the Earth is destroyed. Also differing somewhat from traditional Christian Science theology is Emergence International of Phoenix, Arizona, which provides " spiritual and educational support to lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals as they deal with homophobia and heterosexism" (Emergence International, 2001). While both groups report significant theological differences with leadership and, occasionally, conflicts with Boston. But the extent of any current action by the Board against these groups is difficult to determine.

Conclusion

The future of The Church of Christ, Scientist, seems tremendously limited by its theological and organizational structure. The church came into being at the turn of the last century. Its philosophy, teachings, and the constitution of its worship services were created to meet the needs of a slower-paced, rhetoric-based, horse and buggy society which no longer exists. The theological and pragmatic requirements created and sustained by Mrs. Eddy and the writings which have taken her place as the religion's 'figurehead' have not changed and for the most part, cannot change to keep pace with a post-modern interactive multi-media world.

A primary value of Christian Science–physical healing–has been displaced somewhat through the advance of medical science and technology. Many of the medical maladies for which there was no treatment option other

than Christian Science in the 1870s–polio and tuberculosis, for example–have been eradicated from society, or are quickly and easily treated upon diagnosis.

Working within the structure of the Manual, church leadership has been able to take some positive initiatives, but each initiative is shadowed by potential negative implications. In the late 1990s, church periodicals were redesigned and made more contemporary. At the same time, the Publishing Society began an unprecedented marketing and public relations campaign. The Publishing Society published Science and Health on the World Wide Web, and wrapped it in a new contemporary cover for sale in popular bookstores. Radio commercials for the book focused on its help for sufferers of stress and downplayed its association with the church. While reports indicated that annual sales had exceeded 100,000 copies (Kramer, 2000; Fraser, 1999), critics charged that the marketing campaign was designed to divert attention from the theology of Christian Science and package the religion as a "self help" philosophy (Kramer, 2000, p. 202).

The growth of the World Wide Web through the 1990s and into the new century presents a bountiful opportunity to spread the gospel of Christian Science to an electronically connected world. Although the Christian Science Publishing Society maintains a large interactive Web site containing full-text version of Science and Health and articles from publications, the Quarterly bible lessons which Mrs. Eddy designed for daily study are not online. These lessons, which would be key to attracting and retaining new followers, can only be obtained through purchase from the Publishing Society or in a church Reading Room. In addition to not taking full advantage of its own Web site as a medium for promotion of the faith and recruitment of new converts, Mother Church leadership appears poised to battle other entities which do proselytize on the Web, even to the extent of pursuing those who dare to use the words Christian Science. Such a strategy may be legally appropriate, but is at best questionable when the public relations impact is considered.

Meanwhile, church leadership remains on alert in the event of future legal action regarding children's health care. In the 1980s and 90s, The Mother Church was forced to legally defend itself in several U.S. states for complicity in the deaths of children who died while under prayer healing treatment of Christian Science practitioners. Though the church won most of the lawsuits, the actions further harmed the public reputation of the church (DesAutels, Battin, & May, 1999), set legal precedent for such actions, and resulted in the establishment of

at least one public interest legal affairs entity specifically aimed at opposing Christian Science treatment (Kramer, 2000).

An extensive renovation is taking place within the 14-acre Mother Church complex in Boston. The project includes a $25 million museum, approved for construction by the Board to house some of Mrs. Eddy's writings and artifacts (Nieber, 2000) which had never before been publicly available (Gill, 1998). But at the same time, office space within the complex that the church is unable to fill has been rented out to secular groups. As a result of a continuing difficulty finding working-age job applicants within the faith, Mother Church leadership has begun hiring non-Christian Scientists to fill staff positions in Boston (Kramer, 2000).

While church membership totals remain secret, at least two percent of branch churches close each year, and one estimate suggests fewer than 600,000 Mother Church members remained at the end of the 1990s (Fraser, 1999). As branch churches close, assets revert to the Mother Church–which, essentially, feeds off the demise of its faithful.

In summary, the Church of Christ, Scientist, finds itself in a very difficult situation as it enters the third century of its existence. The church is theologically and structurally ill-prepared to deal with worldly concerns that must be addressed if members are to unite with the organization, call it their own, and develop their own spirituality according to its tenets. Perhaps most troubling is the fact that several of the controversies church leadership has been involved in are controversies that leadership itself caused, or exacerbated by a strategy characterized as that of "loving condescension" toward non-believers (Kramer, 2000, p. 190).

Because this research effort is the first of its kind to focus specifically on the Church of Christ, Scientist, and its theology, practice, and media manipulation, the study was broad-based and general in nature. Much more research work needs to be done in each of these subject areas. These could include an examination of strategies taken by leadership to adapt 'the letter' of Christian Science to 'the spirit' of contemporary life, an in-depth look at the apostate groups to learn more about what triggered their separation from The Mother Church, and a detailed examination of how church leadership's media manipulation strategies address Web-based content.

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Religion and Topoi in the News:
An Analysis of the "Unsecular Media" Hypothesis

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Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 2001 Convention.

ABSTRACT:

Mark Silk has proposed in *Unsecular Media* that journalists operate with a limited series of topoi and that these are borrowed from religion. Silk thus claims when journalists write about religion, they do so in a very positive manner. In this study, I apply topic analysis to recent news coverage of Jesse Jackson to determine the extent to which the topos of hypocrisy was employed and whether this employment supported or challenged religious values.

Introduction

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between the mass media and religion (e.g, Nordin, 1975; Hart, Turner & Knupp, 1981; Buddenbaum, 1986; Hynds, 1987; Maus, 1990; Dart & Allen, 1993; Mowery, 1995) often examining the specific issues of bias and secularization. Popular conception is that the media negatively portray traditional religious institutions, and thus add to a putative detachment many Americans feel toward those institutions (Silk, 1995, p. 38). Partly on the basis of such popular concerns, researchers have through various means attempted to determine historic changes in the *amount* or *nature* of news coverage of religion. They have also attempted to understand how such changes might have an impact on audiences.

One relatively recent discussant in these issues is Mark Silk whose book *Unsecular Media* challenges the findings of many earlier studies. Silk makes the claim that the media do not challenge basic teachings of established religion in America, and in fact honor it by using crucial concepts from religion in the very act of covering religion.

Silk has worked out this explanation of the media/religion relationship by using the concept of "topos," commonplace ideas that circulate in a given culture and can be used in argumentation. Using this concept as a crucial tool in analyzing journalistic practice, Silk has attempted to understand what "topoi" (plural form of the singular "topos") are most important in covering spiritual aspects of American life. In doing so, he attempts to demonstrate that rather than coming to bury the church, the media come—wittingly or not—to praise it.

This paper attempts to continue investigation along the lines that Silk has set up. If topoi are a useful way of understanding American news coverage of religion, their applicability should continue into present and future coverage. If theoretically sound, topic analysis should help us

understand current media reports of religious activities just as much as it has past reports. With this in mind, I propose using Silk's concept of topoi to better understand recent news coverage of the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Jackson, a long time religious activist and civil rights crusader, was accused of (and eventually confessed to) having an affair with a staff worker and fathering an illegitimate child with her. Numerous national and local news organizations carried reports of the "scandal."

Two examples of religion news to which Silk gives thorough analysis in his book are the cases of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, both of whom were ruined by sex scandals in the 1980s.[1] In describing news coverage of the two preachers, Silk suggests that it is through the topos of hypocrisy that the news media dis-empowered Bakker and Swaggart, while empowering the church as a whole. Silk (1995) claims that such news coverage does *not* show that the media are in a tense relationship with religion, rather that "tension is far less important than Western religious culture per se in explaining how the American news media cover religion" (p. 54).

In the following pages, I will attempt to investigate the extent to which the topos of "hypocrisy" helps understand the way the media have covered the Jesse Jackson case, and the extent to which such coverage might or might not reflect a process of "secularization." More specifically, I shall argue that Silk fails to recognize the flexibility of topoi and the ability of the media to use topoi that could be perceived to be religious in nature in such a way that their religious dimension is vacated. Though only one topos is examined here, its use in the Jackson case lends little support to the hypothesis that the media are more unsecular than secular.

Topoi and Coverage of Religion

Silk's affinity for topoi as a means of understanding the relationship between media and religion is in some ways a reflection of a deeper dissatisfaction with traditional means of

analyzing such. In his chapter titled "The Phantom of Secularism," Silk reviews the debate on media bias toward religion and feels that the results of numerous studies are contradictory and inconclusive. As one example, he examines coverage of two papal visits—one in 1980, the other in 1993—and concludes that the concept of "secular bias" (quotation marks his) does not elucidate the two cases. Bias, according to Silk, does little to explain why religion coverage in the media is the way it is.

As an alternative, Silk (1995) proposes analyzing the "general conceptions" (p. 50) that reporters use in writing their stories. These general conceptions, or topoi as the Greeks called them, are commonplace notions that can be used over and over again within the political, social, and religious discussions of a culture. These "offer jurors moral principles for rendering judgment" and "provide the focus (indeed, the rationale) for journalistic narratives" (p. 51). In other words, the topoi of a culture are a reflection of its deep-seated beliefs. They "cast light on our own system of values" (p. 51).

Silk is not naïve in assuming that such values never conflict. Often societal consensus is hard to reach, and topoi will be inconsistent. Editorial writing, for example, is a site where topoi are often made explicit (Silk, 1995, p. 51). Moreover, Silk admits that occasionally cultural changes occur and topoi must follow (p. 52). Along these lines, nowhere does he suggest that secularization of American society is impossible. He simply indicates that he sees little evidence for such, especially when news is examined from a topical framework.

In doing such examination, Silk tries to lay out a series of topoi he feels to be manifest when news media write about religion. As noted above, Silk feels that these general conceptions are the conceptions not of a secular ethos, but a religious one. Where many critics of the media look at television reports, radio actualities, newspaper stories, and magazine features and see a

consistent bias against the religious, Silk sees a pattern of reporting that reflects a willingness to consistently frame stories along certain lines. Hence he says of those who produce the stories we call "news":

> Ignorant of religion, even hostile to it, some news professionals may be; but the images of religion that they put on display reflect something other than their personal ignorance or hostility. When the news media set out to represent religion, they do not approach it from the standpoint of the secular confronting the sacred. They are operating with ideas of what religion is and is not, of what it ought and ought not be—with topoi—that derive, to varying degrees, from religious sources. (Silk, 1995, p. 55)

Thus Silk sets out in his book to identify some of the basic topoi that are used to cover religion within the American media, and to demonstrate that such topoi are rooted in Western religious practice. Admitting that his list is not exhaustive, he names seven topoi in his book. Those are: good works, tolerance, hypocrisy, false prophecy, inclusion, supernatural belief, and declension (Silk, 1995, p. 55).

Hypocrisy as Topos

As noted above, our purpose is to examine one of Silk's topoi as a means of discussing the thesis of his work as a whole. That topos was chosen on the basis of its applicability to a recent news event that was religion-related.[2] The topos we have chosen for discussion is "hypocrisy."

Hypocrisy is, in Silk's eye, a popular journalistic subject because "pursuing hypocrites can be fun and games" (Silk, 1995, p. 89). Moreover, given journalism's perception of itself as watchdog, pursuing hypocrites is virtuous as well. Silk even perceives the media's tendency to

seek out hypocrites within religious bodies to be a reflection of the journalist having the role of "protector of people's faith" (p. 82).

This is the theme that Silk sees in news coverage of Bakker and Swaggart, two powerful television evangelists who fell victim to scandals in the 1980s. Following the basic thesis of his book as a whole, Silk suggests that the news media had no vendetta for the two preachers on the basis of their religiosity. Rather, the news media used a religious principle, the principle of hypocrisy, to protect the legitimate religious flock (a flock that might be damaged by the two leaders). From this perspective, pointing out the hypocritical actions of Bakker and Swaggart was less a negative action than a positive action.

Hence, within the theme of *Unsecular Media* as a whole, news reporting on Bakker and Swaggart represents not an attack on organized religion, but a means of supporting it. Silk claims that these cases, along with that of Henry Ward Beecher (a famous Congregationalist clergyman accused of adultery in the 19th century), and the Hollywood depiction of Elmer Gantry, reflect a willingness for the media to play by rules set up by established religion.[3] Those rules suggest that acts of religion must be sincere; they suggest that religious practice must be real. For Silk, this perspective makes no sense outside of Western religious tradition. As he describes it:

> Hypocrisy, it need hardly be added, is not a violation of the law. It is a deeply embedded Western religious concept, taken from a Greek term for play-acting and used in Job, Isaiah, and the Gospels to denote the false pretense of piety and virtue. (Silk, 1995, p. 86)

From Silk's perspective, hypocrisy is thus a tool that the media use to let religion be religion, and to let the people know what true religion should be. It is the means by which the media walk beside religion and lend it support. And, the recurring use of topoi such as hypocrisy when the

media are called upon to describe religious activities, is concrete evidence (for Silk, at least) of the way the media and religion are intertwined, not agonistic.

Bakker, Swaggart, and Jackson: Differences and Similarities

Though Jesse Jackson is in many ways very different from both Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, his recent media scandal demonstrates clear similarities he shares with the two televangelists. Moreover, the differences Jackson exemplifies from the other two offer a tremendous locus for examining the power and flexibility of the topos of hypocrisy.

At first glance, Jesse Jackson would seem an odd pairing with the duo whose demise Silk describes. Silk mentions that "neither Swaggart nor the Bakkers [Jim or his wife Tammy Fae] engaged heavily in politics" (Silk, 1995, p. 87). Jackson, on the other hand, has been deeply involved in politics since the 1960s, even running for President on two occasions. In addition, politically and socially, the earlier televangelists would easily be labeled "conservatives," whereas Jackson is the quintessential liberal. Finally, Bakker and Swaggart were considered to exist on the geographical, social, and political fringes of society--for example, choosing to operate their "ministries" from small cities in the South. When describing them in his book, Silk says they are "hardly from the mainstream" (p. 83). Jackson, in contrast, is widely considered an insider in Washington, D.C., the nation's capital and seat of great power and prestige.

Yet for all of these differences, recent news coverage of Jesse Jackson also bears striking similarities to the earlier exposés. Certainly Jackson is similar to the other religious leaders in that he built a large "parachurch" organization as did Bakker and Swaggart. With Jackson, perhaps, this distance between the organization (namely Rainbow/PUSH) and the church is quite great, but the religious dimension is still evident. For example, the official organization webpage consistently refers to Jackson as "the Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson" (www.rainbowpush.org).

News organizations also use Jackson's religious title and sometimes highlight the religious dimension of his political/social work. One of the most recent news stories on the civil rights leader began with the words "For decades Rev. Jesse Jackson has picketed and prayed and negotiated on behalf of bus drivers, coal miners and steelworkers" (Davey, 2001, p. 1).

As noted in this quotation, another similarity can be seen in media visibility. Bakker and Swaggart had for several years before their downfall developed a keen sense of how to use the media. Silk suggests that this was a key factor in their downfall. In his reading of the events, journalists felt that "living by the media, they deserved to perish by the media" (Silk, 1995, p. 87). Certainly Jackson is as adept if not more adept at developing media exposure. In fact, Jackson's media exposure has most often been in the news media themselves, while much of Bakker and Swaggart's prominence in the media was due to paying for airtime or developing their own broadcast channels.

Whether this will lead Jackson to "perish by the media" is yet to be seen. But a third similarity lies in the anticipation of such by some bodies. In the earlier case of Jim Bakker, Silk (1995, p. 83) reminds us that it was Jimmy Swaggart who first celebrated Bakker's negative press, presumably hoping it would lead to his own increase in power. Marvin Gorman, another evangelist was then instrumental in exposing Swaggart (p. 86). In the end, Silk claims it was Jerry Falwell, who gained long-term benefit from the fall of the other two (p. 87).

Nobody can guess whether Jackson's prestige will suffer significant damage due to recent news reports about marital infidelity, illegitimate paternity, or inappropriate use of funds. At least one news organization has suggested there are those would like to see him unseated. Belluck (2001) describes it as follows:

> Ambitious members of the black clergy have begun suggesting publicly that Mr. Jackson's role as the nation's pre-eminent African-American figure is on the wane and that the time is right for a new generation of leadership.

The basis on which Jackson's role would be waning is open for dispute. And dispute has already begun in the media. In the process of that dispute, much is revealed about the nature of "hypocrisy" as a topos by which the media report about religion.

The Jackson Scandal in the News

Though Silk does not give a careful description of his method, his general goal is to understand how topoi are used to frame news stories. In analyzing the topos of hypocrisy, he uses the Bakker and Swaggart scandals as his chief cases. During the process of analyzing these cases he cites two newspaper stories, two stories from *Penthouse* magazine, one from *Newsweek*, one from *Editor and Publisher*, and two books on the subject (see Silk, 1995, pp. 89-90).

For our current purpose of investigating the Jackson case, a more systematic method has been used. The Jackson scandal first reached the national press on January 17, 2001 when Jackson openly admitted that he had fathered a child out of wedlock. National newspapers first published the story on January 18th. For the purposes of this study, I have done an online search of four national newspapers (*The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal*) between January 18th and January 31.[4] The keyword searched was "Jesse Jackson." As the intent was to understand how newspapers as a medium utilize topoi, both news stories and editorials were considered for analysis. Letters to the editor and editorials by guests who had never published in a given newspaper were eliminated from the sample.

In the end, fifteen stories were used for this study. *The Wall Street Journal* gave little coverage to the incident, only registering one article. The other three newspapers were nearly equal in regards to the number of stories they wrote on Jackson during this period.

Hypocrisy as Topos in the Jackson Scandal

On January 18, 2001, certain aspects of Jesse Jackson's private life became public knowledge. When a tabloid came to him with evidence of a child he had fathered with a former colleague, Jackson was forced to reveal embarrassing secrets he had hidden for some time. Jackson, married to Jackie Jackson for 38 years, released a statement in which he admitted to having an affair with Karin Stanford who was now caring for their 20 month old child in the Los Angeles area.

The mainstream press began delving into the story immediately after Jackson's admission. Within 24 hours *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times* all ran stories. All three led their stories with the issue of paternity. The lead of *The New York Times* stated that Jackson acknowledged "he had fathered a child out of wedlock." From *The Washington Post* the wording was that "Jackson has fathered an out-of-wedlock daughter." From *The Los Angeles Times* it was that "he had fathered a daughter out of wedlock."

Jackson's persona was certainly a factor in the coverage. All three initial stories (in fact, *all* of the news stories studied here) used his title "Reverend" in the first reference to him. *The LA Times* designated Jackson as a "Baptist preacher," while the *New York Times* labeled him a "Baptist minister." *The Post* made no reference to his religious position other than his title of Reverend.

Even so, the religious dimension of the story was strong, and hypocrisy was certainly a key feature in framing the story early in the coverage. One article (Tobar and Slater, 2001) even

mentioned "cries of hypocrisy" in the headline. Only four actually used the word "hypocrisy" or an etymological derivative. Numerous journalists used wording that indicated hypocrisy was a key topos. Some made the connection themselves; others quoted sources who drew the necessary inferences to bring hypocrisy into the discussion.

Many writers intimated hypocrisy by simply making mention of Jackson's moral and religious ties. Kurtz (2001b), for example, quoted television commentator Britt Hume, who stated "this is Reverend Jackson, whose standing as a spokesman on racial and moral issues stems at least in part from the collar he figuratively wears." Tom Oliphant, a well-known editorial cartoonist was also quoted by Kurtz. For Oliphant, the moral-religious dimension of Jackson's work was again the means by which his actions are to be judged. He claimed that Jackson's problems are fair game for the media because Jackson "talked to all of us about morality and sin as well as appropriations." Oliphant made the hypocrisy line blatant—with words reminiscent of Silk's definition of hypocrisy—when he stated "there's a private life that's at variance with the public one." Finally, though Donna Britt (2001), spoke for herself in her Op-ed piece rather than quoting another journalist, she also sees hypocrisy stemming from the moral/religious dimension of Jackson's life. "When you set yourself up as having considerable moral heft, as Jackson has—and when you court attention that assiduously—your missteps are as much fodder for mindless gossip as Helen Hunt's rumored face-life" (Britt, 2001).

These sources were not on the most trod path, however. At least six different voices were brought forward to suggest that Jackson's hypocrisy was not a general hypocrisy of being religious yet not following one's religious code. By far the most resonant accusation of hypocrisy in all of the articles had to do with Jackson's willingness to visibly counsel Bill Clinton during the midst of the President's own sex scandal. Saltonstall (2001) mentions that

Stanford gave birth "months after Jackson began counseling Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky scandal." Belluck (2001a) reminds us that Jackson "served as a spiritual adviser to the Clinton family." Kurtz (2001b) is less delicate, stating that the "tawdry tale was boosted by Jackson's audacity in bringing his then-pregnant girlfriend, Karin Stanford, to pose with Bill Clinton while the reverend was counseling the president over the Monica Lewinsky affair." Kurtz (2001b) then goes on to quote two other journalists who use the Lewinsky connection to justify reporting about Jackson. Steve Coz states, "you've got the spiritual leader for Bill Clinton during the Monica sex scandal embroiled in an affair of his own…It's also legitimate from the aspect of Reverend Jackson's preaching about the moral fiber of America." Clarence page points out that "The White House held up Jackson as a model of moral authority to whom Clinton was turning." Lastly, Tobar and Slater (2001) tied the Lewinsky angle back to the general connection to religiosity. They remind readers that the "child was born during the time that Jackson served as 'spiritual advisor' to Clinton." In addition, they explain that this will have an effect on "Jackson's role as a political leader with a religious standing, the sort of speaker who sprinkles biblical references into his oratory."

Worth noting here, however, is that most references to hypocrisy came early in the reporting of the events. On January 20th, the focus of the news story shifted slightly as financial exchanges between Jackson and Stanford became a key issue of investigation. In addition, Jackson made public appearances in which allies demonstrated continued support for the civil rights leader. At this time, four stories appeared ("Rainbow Coalition Stands," 2001; Belluck, 2001b; "Jesse Jackson Plans," 2001; "Jackson Thanks," 2001) that played down the hypocrisy topos, making no juxtaposition of words and deeds. In these stories the deeds are listed in brief factual manner and no critics of Jackson are summoned forth. In fact, the Reverend Jerry Falwell

is cited in one story ("Rainbow Coalition Stands," 2001) and is listed as having "praised Jackson for speaking forthrightly about the affair." In none of these stories was a reference made to the hypocrisy of the advisory role during the Clinton/Lewinsky matter, other than one brief one ("Jesse Jackson Pans," 2001) where it was downplayed significantly. In that story, *The Times* reported "Mr. Jackson said he received a call from former President Bill Clinton, to whose side Mr. Jackson rushed when Mr. Clinton's own extramarital relationship threatened to topple his presidency."

Oddly, after this shift in tone, no more hard news stories occurred in the four dailies for the month of January. Instead, five Op-ed pieces were run. Within these five essays, various perspectives were provided on Jackson's style and the appropriateness of the moral judgment that had been provided in the media thus far. Within this discussion, the hypocrisy topos became much less certain.

Michael Eric Dyson's (2001) piece can be summarized with his claim that we "need to acknowledge that our leaders will occasionally disappoint themselves and us." Charges of hypocrisy are inappropriate here, he says. "Because Mr. Jackson has so prominently urged young people to take the high road of personal responsibility, some conclude that his actions reveal hypocrisy," he states. "But it is not hypocritical to fail to achieve the moral standards that one believes are correct. Hypocrisy comes when leaders conjure moral standards that they refuse to apply to themselves and when they do not accept the same consequences they imagine for others who offend moral standards." Dyson (2001) thus concludes:

> The obsession with sexual sin has distorted our understanding of the morality of leadership. Our leaders cannot possibly satisfy the demand for purity that some make.

> And neither should they try. Leaders who are blemish-free often possess a self-satisfaction that stifles genuine leadership.

For Dyson, then, hypocrisy is not the topos of the story because Jackson is not a hypocrite. Jackson is presumed to be willing to live with the consequences of his actions. And, he is presumed to apply those same consequences to others. Hypocrisy is not simply a matter of saying one thing and doing another.

Hank Stuever (2001) also reduces the power of the hypocrisy topos, but by other means. In a tongue-in-cheek piece about the nature of the "love child" (borrowing a term from an old tune by Diana Ross and the Supremes), Stuever suggests that the nation was too busy "finger-wagging" at President Bush's inauguration and President Clinton's pardons to devote much energy to Jackson. In addition, Jackson's actions were not really that hypocritical.

> Men of the cloth still have a way of shocking us with their love children. We think they should have a special clarity on fidelity, and it hurts to learn over and over that they don't. Jesse Jackson goes into this category, though not quite like priests and bishops or televangelists. Maybe because he doesn't lecture people about sex and purity, sticking instead to equality and politics. (Stuever, 2001)

Jackson's selection of politics as a moral message rather than sexuality, thus gives him more sexual freedom than other religious leaders. To label public persons hypocrites is more difficult when they do not publicly address an area in which they are weak.

This does not give Jackson a complete pass, however. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, Ho!man W. Jenkins Jr. suggests that it is Jackson's political and economic statements that should draw the most scrutiny. As in many other articles we have studied, Jenkins plays up Jackson's religious affiliation, referring to him as a "civil rights agitator, preacher, and

presidential candidate." Most of all, however, he focuses on Jackson's ability to make financial gain while preaching "victimology." In fact, Jenkins suggests the sex scandal was leaked to the press by Jesse's own staff because of disgruntlement not over the sexual infidelity, but financial malfeasance. In Jenkins' own words, the staff was "concerned less with fornication than with where the funds came from to set up his ex-mistress."

Smith (2001) echoes this nonchalance toward the sexual dimension of the scandal, offering an analysis from a French perspective. Her thesis is that Americans are very uptight about sexual matters because of our moral debts to religious Puritans. In France, where the Puritan movement had little impact, extramarital affairs and illegitimate children are not scandalous, as they are in the United States. Smith faces the issue of Jackson and hypocrisy directly, claiming "many people saw his actions as hypocritical." With the assistance of quotes from a "sexologist at the City University of New York," Smith then explains to her readers that Americans are more hypocritical than people from other countries are, because "we're still laboring under puritanical, Victorian views." Smith thus brushes off Jackson's hypocrisy as a cultural condition, and even offers hope that such matters will be less salient in the future due to "progress over the last 100 years toward maturity in our sexual attitudes."

In the last entry of the month, Howard Kurtz (2001a) revisited media coverage of the Jackson affair. He did so not from the perspective of journalists as he did in his earlier essay (Kurtz, 2001b), but from the perspective of those who are politically involved. His claim is that the trend in coverage of political sex scandals has become quite predictable. When a conservative is victim of the exposé, conservatives blame the liberal press while liberals claim hypocrisy. When a liberal is victim, the right displays disgust at liberal values and the left attempts to demonstrate that private lives have no impact on public policy. Within the media

themselves, "most of the commentariat splits along ideological lines in stunningly knee-jerk fashion."

The most striking thing about Kurtz's article is that despite the headline ("After Jackson's fall, a rush to judgment."), the essay veers quite far from the original subject. After concluding that commentary on and reception of the Jackson affair are predictable, Kurtz discusses two recent editing decisions at the *LA Times* that have nothing to do with Jackson or reporting on hypocrisy. Perhaps Kurtz is communicating that a rush to judgment in the Jackson case is ill advised, so no judgment is possible whatsoever. Certainly the overall message is that any charge of hypocrisy is itself suspect.

Discussion

What is clearly evident from the above description is that the topos of hypocrisy is still used in the news media when discussing religious issues. The times when hypocrisy seems to have been most integrated into the discussion of these issues is when Jackson's moral and religious persona was most directly relevant to the allegations against him.

What is also evident, though is that the topos of hypocrisy is not the only means of addressing the story at hand and that many in the media prefer other approaches with fewer religious overtones. During the second stage of reporting mentioned above, little mention of hypocrisy was given in spite of the fact that such was possible. Jackson is well known for his discussion of economic matters (particularly economic justice) and any financial improprieties that might be uncovered could certainly be analyzed as examples of saying one thing and doing another.[5]

But this issue simply shows the multi-faceted nature of many news stories and the way the media are able to focus on those issues that they choose. Whether media practitioners choose

on the basis of their own orientations or based on perceptions of audience interest is not certain, but in this instance there are obvious repercussions in terms of the secular or unsecular nature of the media reports.

For example, in the Jackson case the earliest reports consistently framed stories on the issue of paternity, not marital infidelity. This is problematic from the "unsecular media" perspective. As Silk points out, the topos of hypocrisy tends to relate to matters that are moral, not legal. Hypocrisy, Silk says, "is not a violation of the law" (p. 86). Yet adultery, an issue that is largely moral and has few legal ramifications, received little discussion in the news reports. Paternity, which is more often an issue of civil law, received much attention. As investigation into financial matters in Jackson's non-profit organizations is ongoing, only time will tell if the issue that could relate to criminal law registers with reporters. Of the two issues studied here—adultery and paternity—the one that is least likely to be a legal matter (it thus a moral issue, not a "violation of the law") gained least attention. If hypocrisy is the dominant topos and charges of hypocrisy are religion based—not law based—this should not be the case.

One might also argue that between these two issues, most Western religions say more about the former (adultery) than the latter (paternity). Whereas proscription of adultery is undeniably one of the Ten Commandments revered by Christians and Jews, no direct mention is made in the Decalogue of siring illegitimate children. And for Christians, the topic of adultery is included in the Sermon on the Mount, one of the most sacred texts on ethics.[6] For many adherents of traditional Western religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam included) sexual purity in itself is an important aspect of religious life.

Yet in the media reports studied here, this is not the crucial link. And though commentators openly expressed reasons for not dwelling on Jackson's original sexual

transgressions, such explanations are not necessarily helpful in demonstrating the unsecular nature of the media. Several of those commentators suggested that Jackson's illicit sexual relations were not (in themselves) that important because Jackson spends little time discussing such matters directly. Presumably then, hypocrisy is only applicable for those areas of a person's life on which he/she speaks out publicly. If hypocrisy is saying one thing and doing another, the best way to avoid such is to not say anything. From this perspective, in the earlier cases of Bakker and Swaggart, tortured analysis of their sexual sins was appropriate because both had occasionally spoken out on issues of sexual sin. As logical sequitur, since Jackson's focus is usually politics, not sexual morality, his extramarital relationship is not (in and of itself) worthy of media attention.[7] Apparently paternity is more of a "political" issue, and thus fair game.

This logic does not appear to reflect the unsecular world that Silk envisions. It demonstrates that a topos can be borrowed and twisted in a way that actually defeats its original purpose. French sociologist/theologian Jacques Ellul demonstrated this in his book *The Betrayal of the West* when he pointed out that many use accusations of hypocrisy in a way very different from the original Christian use.

> When Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, he was challenging them to live up to the principles they proclaimed. At the present time, the same accusation is nothing but an attempt at self-justification, an excuse for abandoning principles. (Ellul, 1978, p. 55).

When news media representatives charged Bakker and Swaggart with "hypocrisy," then, they did not *necessarily* agree with the sexual mores the two televangelists were preaching from the pulpit. To Ellul, it is possible that the reporters completely *disagreed* with the morality the preachers espoused. But by bludgeoning Bakker and Swaggart with their own morality, reporters

could feel superior and remove people who proposed that morality (all the better if the reporters *did* disagree with it).

This is quite different from what Silk envisions. He sees the media as strengthening religion by protecting the morality of the church. Succinctly, he states:

> What had happened at PTL, what Jimmy Swaggart had done, was not just a private matter, was not just financial fraud and sexual peccadillo. It was an abuse of the faith of their followers and, by extension, of all believers. At bottom, that is what the topos of religious hypocrisy is all about, and why there was a remarkably united front of media, evangelicals, *Penthouse* readers, and "Nightline" watchers to heap abuse on the hypocrites. (Silk, 1995, p. 88)

But the abuse heaped on Jesse Jackson was short lived, if it was heaped at all. Several reporters were wondering about the effect of their reporting from the start. Kurtz (2001b) noticed right away that "there's no immediate feeding frenzy." Tobar and Slater (2001) ended their report with a quote from a Democratic political consultant who said "I would be shocked if two years from know (sic) we don't look and see Jesse Jackson on the radar screen." And Jenkins (2001) noted within a week of the breaking news that "the Jackson rehabilitation has been accomplished in an eye-blink." Oddly enough, one article on the Jackson affair made direct reference to Bakker and Swaggart. Sean Hannity, interviewed by Kurtz (2001b), asked "Will Jesse Jackson get the same treatment that Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker got when they were exposed? Will the media shame him off the public stage?" At this point, the evidence suggests the answer to both questions is negative.

Conclusions

One possible reason for the difference in coverage of these scandals is that Jackson's religion is much less evident than either Bakker's or Swaggart's. Such an interpretation does not corroborate Silk's. In addition, such an interpretation is based on limited evidence available here and is worthy of further empirical investigation. As noted above, in this instance the topos of hypocrisy was used briefly. Once it was abandoned, much of the writing tended to question the reasonableness of high expectations of sexual fidelity itself. Rather than discussing means by which extramarital affairs can be avoided—no article offered this—the articles focused on whether marital faithfulness is a worthy and realistic expectation.

This in itself raises questions about the secular or unsecular nature of the media. Other general findings do so as well. As discussed above, the use of the topos of hypocrisy need not support religious belief. To begin with, the concept of hypocrisy *need not* be founded on religious principles. Silk admits this when he says that the topoi used to report about religion are derived from religious sources "to varying degrees." In the case of the topos of hypocrisy, two simple questions demonstrates this. Might not one atheist charge another atheist with hypocrisy? If so, does use of the topos indicate religious adherence?

Moreover as discussed here, charges of hypocrisy can often be grounds for abandoning principles. Though no article directly requested that its readers abandon certain moral principles, some suggested our principles (as a culture) are outdated and abandonment might be worthy of consideration. Given the fact that some of those principles are imbedded in Western religious traditions, labeling such abandonment as "unsecular" seems illogical.

This is not to say that those who recommend abandoning those principles are immoral or amoral. What should be noted is that they are simply proposing codes of morality that are very

different from those held by many Americans, Americans who perceive their morals to be based on religious principles.[8] To propose alternatives to these religious-based principles is certainly permissible (perhaps even admirable) in a democracy. The key area of interest for Silk is whether the media are more often in collaboration with those whose morals are perceived to be based on Western religious traditions, or those who perceive themselves to obtain their morals elsewhere. In regards to the topos of hypocrisy, the media seem to be suggesting non-religious traditions as sources for moral authority just as much (if not more) than religious ones.

Of course, Silk list seven topoi that he claims demonstrate the unsecular nature of the media. I have had time to deal with only one of them. Each of the others is worthy of empirical study. For example, Silk claims that the media pursue "false prophecy" within religious institutions just as zealously as they do hypocrisy. In doing so, according to Silk, the media lend support to legitimate religious bodies. Is there evidence in the media that the media thus distinguish and honor "true" prophets? Similar questions can be asked of the topos of "good works." When Silk claims that the media honor religion by recognizing its "good works," is there any evidence of activities that religious institutions perceive to be "good works" but are denigrated by the media? Finally, Silk claims that Western religious institutions are by their very nature "tolerant" and the media are supportive of religion when they expose intolerance in religion. Is his description of most Western religious traditions as "tolerant" accurate? When media expose the intolerance of religious bodies, is the end result greater appreciation for religion as a whole?

As with the study just presented, in each of these cases there is a need for thorough investigation of the topos, the accuracy of Silk's description of it, and the effects of its use in the media. The overriding finding here is that a topos may does have some of its roots in a religious

tradition and yet be used in a way that calls into question traditional religious practice. Silk has admirably opened up a new avenue for investigating the relationship between the media and religion. Other scholars must follow his lead if we hope for deeper understanding.

Endnotes

[1] Of course, Bakker's case was more than a sex scandal, as there were also issues of fraud, issues that eventually were cause for his criminal prosecution and conviction. Jackson's sexual scandal has also led to investigative reporting into whether the civil rights leader's books are in order.

[2] The extent to which the Jackson story is "religion-related" will be discussed later.

[3] The case of Elmer Gantry is an interesting one worthy of further investigation. Silk makes an effort to distinguish between the literary account (by author Sinclair Lewis) and the "mass media" account (as portrayed in Hollywood cinema). Within this framework, the claim is that the literary account was too strong "for the mass media" (Silk, 1995, p. 81). In this way, Silk seems to be suggesting that literature is not a mass medium and does not follow the general patterns he lays out in the rest of his book. Nowhere however, does he discuss what makes a medium a mass medium, and if the "unsecular" nature he describes varies from medium to medium. One might infer from his comments, though, that the news media are more "unsecular" than literature.

[4] Understandably, these four publications do not necessarily demonstrate how "the media" utilize topoi in covering religion. They should, however, give some sense of how national media do. Clearly more studies of how smaller, more localized media cover such issues are in order. Silk tends to focus on national media in his book, though occasionally relying on accounts from smaller outlets such as the *Charlotte Observer*.

[5] News coverage of the Jackson case has extended beyond the time frame marked for this paper. In those stories since January 29th much attention has been given to Jackson's financial dealings. The extent to which these are framed from a topos of hypocrisy is worthy of future investigation.

[6] Though the sermon on the mount stresses the importance of righteousness (in matters of adultery, for example), many understand it to also communicate that humans cannot achieve righteousness in their own actions. Thus the sermon encompasses both the subject of not judging others, but also the importance of seeking righteousness. A common understanding is that ultimately true righteousness can only come from Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice.

[7] This assumes that reporters are reasonably aware of the public rhetoric of religious leaders and can make accurate distinctions between the content of various leaders' rhetoric (a questionable assumption). When Stuever (2001) claims that Jackson does not lecture people about sexuality, he is clearly suggesting that other religious leaders do. One might hesitate to claim that Jackson never makes pronouncements on sexuality. Moreover, certainly Jackson holds particular beliefs about what is right and wrong. Are we to believe that since Jackson never preached on adultery that he takes no moral stance on the issue?

[8] Understandably, some who attack morals based on certain religious principles are simply using different interpretations of the same religious tradition to do so. A good example of this is the debate about homosexuality within the Christian church wherein adherents of various positions on the issue all claim to honor Christian scripture (see Batalden Scharen, 2000; Stott, 1998). In the news media accounts here, though, no alternative religious foundations were given. Note how Smith (2001) sets up the Puritan tradition within Christianity as a source of moral authority, and contrasts it with an a-religious system of morality based on French aristocratic behavior and modern sexology. She gives no basis in Catholic theology for a different view of sexual morality than the "Puritanical" view.

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Gone Fishin': A Framing Analysis of the Fight over a Small Town's City Seal

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Paper presented to Religion and Media Interest Group
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annual conference in Washington, D.C, August 2001

Gone Fishin': A Framing Analysis of the Fight over a Small Town's City Seal

This study is a framing analysis of regional and national newspaper, Internet and Associated Press news coverage of the legal dispute over the inclusion of a fish symbol on the city seal in the small town of Republic, MO. Analysis of news articles revealed four frames. First, news reports framed the fish as a Christian symbol, despite supporters' contentions that it merely represented non-denominational moral values. Second, news reports trivialized the dispute by framing the issue as unimportant. Third, news accounts represented the plaintiff in the lawsuit against the city as a religious outsider because of her Wiccan beliefs. Fourth, news accounts framed the dispute in terms of grassroots support for the fish symbol and outside meddlers opposed to the fish symbol.

Gone Fishin': A Framing Analysis of the Fight over a Small Town's City Seal

In the small Southwest Missouri town of Republic, a fight over the use of a fish logo -- considered by some to be a symbol of Christianity, by others to be representative of generic religious values -- on the city seal prompted a legal battle that drew news coverage from the major television networks, newspapers such as the Kansas City Star and The New York Times, Internet sites, and The Associated Press. The legal fight pitted the American Civil Liberties Union, which went to federal court on behalf of a local woman who was a practicing Wiccan, and many of the 8,000 residents and town officials of Republic, who enlisted the aid of the National Legal Foundation to represent them in the court battle. Ultimately, a U.S. District Judge granted a summary judgment in 1999 finding that the fish symbol violated the constitution's requirement of separation of church and state.

This study uses framing analysis to examine the print media coverage of the Republic fish fight in an effort to determine how the news media reported the dispute. This court and public relations battle, which took place over a period of slightly more than a year, presents an opportunity to see how the mainstream media dealt with the conflict between civil liberties and religious freedom.

Framing

The media do not serve as a mirror, reflecting all of reality. Rather, the media serve as a window through which media consumers see only a small segment of reality. That window frame, as it were, through which media consumers see the world provides a rich venue for research.

Entman (1993) writes that frames focus on and highlight some aspects about the subject of communication, "thereby elevating them in salience" (p. 53). Framing involves selecting an aspect of an event and making it more salient "in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Facts alone have no meaning of their own. It is only through being placed in some context though emphasis or focus as part of a frame do facts take on relevance (Gamson, 1989). To Gamson and Modigliani (1989), a frame is a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to reports about an issue. "Frames are conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information" (Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992, p. 60). "The frame," Neuman, Just and Crigler write," does not predetermine the information individuals will seek but it may shape aspects of the world that the individual experiences either directly or through the news media and is thus central to the process of constructed meaning" (p. 61). Frames are not selected by the media accidentally but actively as a way to allow consumers to interpret and discuss events (Tuchman, 1978). "A frame is a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue" (Gamson, 1989, p. 157). A frame "suggests what the issue is about. It answers the question, 'what is the basic source of controversy or concern on this issue?'" (Gamson, 1988, p. 165).

Framing is not monolithic. A single news story may contain several frames as reporters, editors and sources attempt to highlight aspects of events. Gamson (1989) writes that there may be many "senders" in most news reports: "The reporter or anchor person suggests a story line in the lead and closing; the sources quoted suggest frames in sound bites or interviews. ... For many events there may be more than one frame suggested, and one needs to ask questions about the prominence of competing frames in the same news report" (p. 158). A single sentence may contain several frames, or none at all (Entman, 1993). Framing also need not be intended:

frames are often unspoken and unacknowledged (Gitlin, 1980). Selection of frames, intended or not, has a crucial impact on the way consumers of media reports see the world. As Pan and Kosicki (1993) write, "Choices of words and their organization into news stories are not trivial matters. They hold great power in setting the context for debate, defining issues under consideration, summoning a variety of mental representations, and providing the basic tools to discuss the issues at hand" (p. 70).

Several studies have found a connection between media frames and consumer attention to or memory of information, although the relationship is not exact; individuals have their own cognitive framework in which they receive and interpret media messages (Graber, 1988; Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992; Sotirovic, 2000). "On the one hand, we have a system of media discourse that frames events and presents information always in some context of meaning. On the other hand, we have a public of interacting individuals who approach media discourse in an active way, using it to construct their own personal meanings about public events and issues" (Gamson, 1988, p. 165). Pan and Kosicki (1993) write that framing analysis "views news texts as consisting of organized symbolic devices that will interact with individual agents' memory for meaning construction" (p. 58). Still, news media framing can influence public opinion and therefore public policy (Andsager, 2000).

Numerous framing studies have examined the ways in which the media frame social movements or social issues (for example, Gitlin, 1980; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Baylor; 1996; Liebler and Bendix, 1996; Ashley and Olson, 1998; Sotirovic, 2000; Andsager, 2000). Few, however, have examined framing of either civil liberties issues or religion.

One study by Nelson, Clawson and Oxley (1997) used experimental data to study the effect of framing on civil liberties conflict. They provided participants with one of two "frames" of news stories about a proposed Ku Klux Klan rally -- one framing the rally as a free speech issue, the other as a disruption of public order. They found

that participants viewing the free speech frame exhibited greater tolerance for the Klan's activities than did the participants who were provided with the disruption of order frame.

In a recent study, Huckins (2000) examined 10 years of coverage in three major newspapers of two leaders in the political-religion realm: the Rev. Jerry Falwell from the religious right and the Rev. William Sloane Coffin of the religious left. He found links between framing in these newspapers and Entman's (1993) categorization of frames as defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies.

While not explicitly discussing framing, Silk (1995) writes that "Like other subjects of journalistic attention, religion has its familiar story types. ... the cultural preconceptions found in reporting are stock sentiments and figures that journalists share with their publics" (p. 1012). Similarly, Lindoff (1996) does not expressly use framing analysis in his study of letters to the editor in Lexington, Ky., concerning the controversial movie "The Last Temptation of Christ." But Lindoff notes that letter writers used common themes -- frames, as it were -- to express their opinions of the movie. Those opposing the movie most commonly framed the film as blasphemy and denigration of Jesus (p. 156). For those favoring the movie, Lindoff writes "One argument that was made in varying ways was that of *framing the film for what it is -- just a movie*" (p. 161, his emphasis).

Background of the Republic Fish Fight

The dispute over Republic's fish symbol had its origins in 1990, when city leaders used a community-wide design contest to chose the new city seal. The winning entry depicted a circle with four quadrants. In one was a Missouri map with Republic's location marked. A second section depicted an extended hand to illustrate

the city's hospitality. A third segment showed the silhouette of a family to illustrate the city's family-friendly atmosphere. The fourth -- and subject of the legal dispute -- showed a fish symbol, commonly known as the ichthus, which city officials said illustrated the city's support of religious values, ("ACLU says Missouri Town's," 1998). After the winning seal design was selected by city officials, it was then used on the city's trucks, flags, street signs, stationery and business cards (Goodstein, 1998).

The Ozarks chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, based in nearby Springfield, MO, asked the city to remove the fish symbol from its seal and from all city-owned property. When the city refused, the ACLU filed suit in U.S. District Court in Springfield on behalf of a Republic resident who was a Wiccan seeking to have the city seal ruled as an unconstitutional breach of the separation of church and state. City officials promised to fight the ACLU in court, but only if local residents raised $100,000 to finance at least half of the city's defense (Leaming, 1998).

In 1999, U.S. District Judge Russell Clark ruled that the Republic fish symbol violated the First Amendment and ordered that it be removed from all city property, writing in his decision "While the purpose of placing the fish symbol on the city seal may not have been to endorse Christianity, the effect of the seal is to do so" ("Federal Judge: Missouri Town's Seal," 1999). Clark's ruling gave Republic city officials 30 days to file an appeal or remove the fish logo from city-owned property. Ten days after Clark's ruling, the Republic Board of Aldermen voted 5-4, with Mayor Doug Boatright casting the tie-breaking vote, to accept the judge's ruling and remove the symbol (Rogers, 1999).

Method and Analysis of Frames

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of news articles in regional and national newspaper, wire service, and Internet reporting about the Republic fish

fight from May 1997, when the dispute over the city seal erupted, until July 1999, when Judge Clark issued his ruling. Articles were obtained through Lexis-Nexis. Based on a review of each article, the author discovered a number of frames; each article was then individually reviewed and coded. News coverage included in this study included reports in The New York Times, Kansas City Star, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, The Associated Press, and The Freedom Forum's web site.

Several frames became apparent in the examination of news coverage. First, despite the fact that a lawsuit was filed and a judge had yet to rule on whether Republic's city seal represented an unconstitutional establishment of a particular religion, as the ACLU's lawsuit contended, or was a constitutional expression of general religious values, news stories framed the debate from the beginning as a dispute over "the Christian fish symbol." Second, many news reports trivialized the dispute through the use of quotes from symbol supporters questioning why the ACLU was interested in a small Missouri town. Third, the plaintiff in the lawsuit was framed almost exclusively in terms of her religious beliefs, while those who supported the city seal were almost never identified in terms of their religious affiliation. Fourth, the dispute over the fish symbol was often framed as a grassroots fight by Republic residents, casting opponents as outside meddlers.

Framing the fish: Almost from the beginning, news media coverage of the Republic controversy began with the assumption that the fish was in fact a Christian symbol, despite the contention of symbol supporters from Republic that it was merely a statement of support for religious or moral values, which they argued would be permissible under the First Amendment. The symbol was described in the media as "the fish symbol of Christianity" ("Wiccan follower," 1998), a "particularly stylized fish as a traditional symbol of Christianity" (Leaming, 1998), "the Christian symbol that adorns the 8-year-old city seal" ("City wants," 1998), and "a sign of Christianity used in the catacombs in ancient Rome" ("Officials endorse," 1998).

Contentions by supporters of the symbol that the fish stood for all religions usually were framed as justification for the city's position, and not statements about the "real" meaning of the symbol. When Mayor Doug Boatright argued that the symbol demonstrated that the community "holds dear religious faith in general and moral values" ("ACLU says," 1998), or when the Republic woman who created the seal said she intended that the fish represented "religion totally, all religion" (Goodstein, 1998, p. A1), these statements were framed as a way to justify what was clearly a Christian symbol. A story in the Kansas City Star early in the dispute illustrates how the dispute was often framed:

> On Republic's city logo, a fish -- a simply drawn symbol developed by early Christians -- has become a campaign issue, sparked an outcry from the American Civil Liberties Union and given Republic some international attention. The fish, according to the city, is "the universal symbol of religion and represents the moral values of the community." But the ACLU says it symbolizes Christianity and has no place on a city logo. (Avila, 1997, p. A1)

In this example, the newspaper story first makes clear that the disputed symbol is Christian in nature, then presents the city's side, and then, through the third sentence, sets up the contrast with the ACLU's position, which with the news media clearly agreed.

Another example of framing the conflict as a dispute over a Christian symbol was the quoting of Republic residents who acknowledged that the fish was Christian in nature, countering the city's official stance that it was non-sectarian. Examples include the minister of the West Republic Baptist Church who was quoted in an Associated Press story as saying the fish represents Christianity, "which meshes with the Christian thinking of those who founded the nation" ("Officials endorse," 1998). In another story, a Republic resident told The New York Times he saw nothing wrong with using a Christian symbol on the city seal "because the majority of our residents

are actually Christians. The majority of our community are very religious. This is the Bible Belt, and the number of churches we have per person is pretty high" (Goodstein, 1998, p. 17A).

Framing the significance: Many news reports of the legal battle over the fish symbol framed the dispute as much ado about little -- in other words, trivializing the conflict. From the beginning, reporters covering the dispute frequently quoted townspeople as wondering why the ACLU would be concerned with the city logo of a community of just 8,000 residents. In the Kansas City Star, Avila (1998), for example, wrote that "Many residents wonder why the ACLU is making such a big deal out of the logo" (p. 1A). The Associated Press, in one of its first dispatches about the growing dispute, quoted several Republic residents as being amazed by the controversy:

> "I was annoyed and flabbergasted at such a stupid thing," said resident Nita Westman, who owns a nail-care shop. Her first reaction, she said, was that she would paint fish on all her customers' nails. . . . DeWayne Willis, a rabbi, said the four Jewish families living in Republic do not feel threatened by the city's Christian majority, nor by the fish on the city logo. . . . Insurance agent Ken Knierim said that with serious problems like crime to tackle, taking on the city logo is trivial. "Somebody does not have enough work to do," Knierim said. ("Officials endorse," 1998)

Similarly, a news article prepared for the Freedom Forum's web site (Leaming, 1998) quotes a lawyer from the American Center for Law and Justice as saying the First Amendment "was not meant to be concerned with a city seal or emblem of that sort."

Even in news articles that did not explicitly quote residents or others as calling the dispute trivial, reporters often trivialized the dispute through their description of the disputed fish symbol, such as a "little Christian fish symbol" ("ALCU asks judge," 1999). In the lead on a Kansas City Star article, Avila (1998) asked, "So a small

town in Missouri wants a fish on its city logo. Who cares? Two of the nation's legal heavyweights, that's who" (p. A1).

Framing the plaintiff: Once the lawsuit was filed and Republic resident Jean Webb was identified in court records as the plaintiff on whose behalf the ACLU filed its suit, news stories nearly always discussed her religious beliefs whenever the lawsuit was mentioned. Webb was described as "a devotee of wicca, a nature-based, benign witchcraft" (Leaming, 1998a), as "a practitioner of Wicca, or witchcraft (Goodstein, 1999, p. A19), a "local believer in witchcraft" (Herring, 1999, p. 2), "Jean Webb, the Wiccan witch in whose behalf the American Civil Liberties Union sued Republic" (Rogers, 1999), and "Jean Webb, the Wiccan witch suing a small southwest Missouri town over its Christian fish symbol" (Rogers, 1999a). More than simple references, two news articles focused solely on Webb's religious beliefs, including her conversion from Baptist to Wiccan, and why she agreed to be the plaintiff in the ACLU's lawsuit (Avila, 1998; "Wiccan Follower," 1998).

In contrast, stories rarely mentioned the religious practices of those who supported the ichthus, and no stories discussed the topic in depth. For instance, one of the leaders of a "citizens' committee" created to raise money to finance the city's defense against the ACLU lawsuit, Paula Howell, was not identified as a member of any religious group. She was described, instead, as "a member of the state Parent Teacher Association board (who) has run for local office as a Democrat" (Goodstein, 1998, p. A1). Marilyn Shexsnayder, who won a $100 prize in a contest by creating the disputed city seal, was identified as "a stockbroker, not an artist" (Goodstein, 1998, p. A1) and as the wife of man who runs a dry-ice business" (Goodstein, 1998, p. A1). She was not described as a Christian.

Framing the community: A common frame in articles about the fish symbol was that of a grassroots effort by local residents fighting to save a treasured symbol in their small town. For instance, in an early news story about the dispute,

local residents were described as uniting in support of the symbol. "The fish began appearing all over town -- on a banner on the side of Calvary Baptist Church, drawn on sidewalks saying, 'Save Me,' as a sculpture on busy U.S. 60, the main route through town. At a local nail salon, manicurists began painting fish on customers' fingernails" (Goodstein, 1998, p. A1). Residents "debated the issue in cafes, barbershops" and "raised money for legal bills through donations and T-shirt sales" (Avila, 1998, p. A1). At a Board of Alderman meeting to discuss the lawsuit, one story noted, 16 people spoke in favor of the fish symbol, and "no one spoke in support of the ACLU" ("Officials endorse," 1998). Even after Judge Clark ruled that the fish symbol was unconstitutional, an Associated Press article began, "It's easy to find people here who disagree with the federal judge's order that the city remove the Christian fish symbol from its municipal seal" ("Residents disagree," 1999).

Several articles focused on a fundraising drive to raise money to finance the city's defense. The "Support Republic Committee" was formed to raise a $100,000 legal defense fund, even though the city's defense was eventually taken on by the National Legal Foundation for free. Regular updates were given on the amount raised. One article even led with how "a class of Sunday school children, barely old enough to write their own names, raised $135 this summer, not for charity, but to save their town's logo: the Christian fish symbol" ("Children, town," 1998). Another story about a Board of Alderman meeting noted a "large and emotional citizen turnout in favor of the symbol" (Leaming, 1998).

In contrast, those opposed to the fish symbol on the city seal were framed as meddling outsiders: either as religious outcasts (a Wiccan) unfamiliar with the town's values or as a large national organization (the ACLU) picking on a small town. One fish supporter even offered a theory that was printed in The New York Times that the ACLU had recruited an outsider to move into Republic and then complain about the symbol (Goodstein, 1998, p. A1). Paula Howell, the leader of the Republic

fundraising group, went on record saying, "I feel very strongly that someone from outside the community shouldn't tell us how we should represent ourselves" (Avila, 1997, p. A1). Similarly, Goodstein (1998) wrote that many residents felt "they must make a stand for local autonomy against meddling outsiders like the ALCU" (p. A1).

Conclusions

Sotirovic (2000) writes that how media accounts are framed can influence public opinions and attitudes: "The choice of a catchy phrase, an attractive metaphor, or an extreme exemplar of human behavior in a report may provide a powerful framework for influencing which aspects of an issue one should bring into focus and which to drop from thinking" (p. 269). In the case of the Republic city seal containing a fish symbol, news accounts framed the dispute in ways that both trivialized and marginalized the issue, while at the same time routinely accepting the opponents' contention that the fish symbol was in fact Christian in nature.

Whether intentional or unintentional (Gitlin, 1980), news accounts of the legal fight framed the dispute as trivial, both through phrasing (such as repeatedly referring to the "little" fish symbol) or by quoting Republic residents as questioning why the ACLU was even interested in the city seal. This trivialization of the dispute cast this particular constitutional question of church-state separation as unimportant in comparison to other disputes such as conflicts over prayer in schools.

Similarly, news accounts almost without exception marginalized the opposition to the city seal through their depictions of the plaintiff. This frame highlighting the plaintiff's religious beliefs focused attention not on the underlying issue, which was whether the city seal was unconstitutional, but rather on Jean Webb's personal beliefs, implying that most people wouldn't object unless they were witches. Ultimately, these beliefs were irrelevant, though, because when the question is

whether a city logo represents establishment of a religion, the lawsuit could just have easily been brought by a member of a mainstream Christian denomination or by someone with no religious affiliation.

Another frame, that of swelling grassroots support for the city seal in opposition to outside "meddlers," again tended to marginalize and trivialize the underlying dispute. By focusing on how much money residents raised to fund the city's defense and by stating that nearly all Republic residents supported the logo, news reports framed the ACLU's opposition to the fish logo as being outside the mainstream. Republic residents who supported the logo were framed as the overwhelming majority, hence representative of the general populace.

One more way news reports trivialized the issue was by suggesting that there was no need for a court ruling regarding what the symbol was because it was obvious that it was a Christian symbol. By deciding for themselves that the underlying issue -- the fish was Christian and not a general symbol of moral values -- the news media determined in effect that the legal case was simply a foregone conclusion.

This framing analysis reveals that journalists framed the Republic fish story in a way that trivialized the issue with the use of specific frames. By framing the story as they did, the news media may have reinforced or opposed their readers' positions on the significant issues surrounding the separation of church and state. Proving the link between media framing and public opinion about the Republic fish dispute is one limitation of this study. Such a link would require that public opinion about the fish logo had been obtained while the news media reports were being produced; such public opinion research is not available. This study, however, provides valuable insight into how news reports frame the complex issue of religion and the First Amendment.

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"Jesus Sends Dolphins to Save Cuban Child:"
How the Press Played the "God Angle" in the Elian Gonzalez Story

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Submitted to:
Association of Educators of Journalism and Mass Communication,
Religion and Media Interest Group
AEJMC annual meeting
Washington, D.C., August 2001

"Jesus Sends Dolphins to Save Cuban Child:"
How the Press Played the "God Angle" in the Elian Gonzalez Story

ABSTRACT

This study explores how well journalists report on supernatural religious claims when they insert themselves in a political and foreign policy story. An analysis of press reports of the Elian Gonzalez story reveals that reporters generally ignored the religious angle. When it was covered, journalists failed to question the assertions or provide any critical explanation that would have added depth and context and better understanding of the political power of religion within the Cuban-American community.

"Jesus Sends Dolphins to Save Cuban Child:"
How the Press Played the 'God angle' in the Elian Gonzalez Story

Introduction

Late in the afternoon on Sunday, November 21, 1999, a small aluminum boat left Cardenas, Cuba and headed toward the United States.[1] Among the 14 people on board the craft were five-year-old Elian Gonzalez, his mother and her boyfriend and another couple, Arriane Horta and Nivaldo Fernandez-Ferra. Two days later, the overcrowded boat ran into extreme weather. The storm capsized the vessel, flinging all of its occupants into the sea. There would be only three survivors – Elian, Horta and Fernandez-Ferra.[2]

It was Tuesday when the boat sank. On Thursday – Thanksgiving Day – November 25, two cousins – Sam Ciancio and Donato Dalrymple – were out for a day of fishing in the Atlantic Ocean, off the coast of Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. Dalrymple spotted an inner tube in the distance. As they guided their boat closer, it appeared as if someone had placed a doll inside the inner tube. The "doll" – as it turned out – was a small boy. Elian had been rescued and the media blitz was about to begin.

The cousins were the first to attribute Elian's rescue to divine intervention. "If there's anybody who doesn't believe there's a God alive, today they do, on Thanksgiving," Ciancio said.[3]

Within two days after Elian's rescue, the media were beginning to note religious references from a variety of sources. *The Miami Herald* identified the two cousins as "fishermen" even though they actually held other occupations,[4] and they quoted Elian's second cousin, Marisleysis Gonzales, who linked Elian's survival to God's plan. "God wanted him here for freedom, and he's here and he

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[1] Terry Spencer. "3 Cubans survive sinking." Associated Press, November 26, 1999.
[2] "Search called off for missing Cubans; Three survivors of capsizing doing well." Associated Press. *Florida Today*. November 18, 1999.
[3] Terry Spencer, "3 Cubans survive sinking," Associated Press, November 26, 1999.
[4] Journalists naming the cousins as "fishermen" would be repeated by the media, bolstering the religious metaphors of Elian as a new messiah or a baby Moses.

will get it," she said.[5]

The early articles on Elian's survival and rescue at sea made no mention of "dolphins" or "Jesus" or the "Virgin Mary" or his "guardian angel" saving him. Those references would come in later articles from sources within the Cuban-American community and Elian's relatives, the Miami family that took him in after his release from the hospital and who subsequently fought the federal government to prevent his return to Cuba.

This study explores the religious symbolism and supernatural claims in the Elian Gonzalez story as reported by the nation's newspapers. The Cuban-American community in Miami drew on their religious heritage to seek meaning in the Elian case and sources there did not hesitate to use religious language when talking with reporters. Thus, it seems reasonable to use the Elian Gonzalez story as a pertinent case study from which to examine how journalists report on supernatural beliefs and religious claims.

This research examines the religious symbolism and references in approximately six months of press reports of the story – from the date of Elian's rescue at sea to his removal from the home of his Miami relatives by federal officials. Insights gained in this study may provide guidance for reporters on how to better cover the "numinous" – supernatural religious claims – while being true to their ethical and journalistic responsibilities to respect their sources and to "seek the truth and report it fully."

Literature Review:

Mass communication scholars say that the media perform four functions: surveillance,

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[5] Elena Cabral, Eunice Ponce, Andres Viglucci, "Little rafter leaves hospital," *The Miami Herald.*, November 27, 1999, 1A.

correlation, the transmission of social heritage and entertainment.[6] Certainly the Elian Gonzalez story illustrates all four of these functions. It provided surveillance of the environment – news reports – and the stories also interpreted the environment, conferring legitimacy and social norms. The media also transmitted the social heritage of Cuban-Americans, their values and norms and, of course, some of the stories could be said to provide a semblance of mass culture "entertainment."

But the media's four functions also have their "dysfunctions" as well. If the media sensationalize or overemphasize stories, perpetuate stereotypes and fall prey to what Daniel Boorstin called "pseudoevents," reporters can distort reality. By focusing on the entertaining, the odd and the trivial rather than providing sufficient context that probes the meaning behind the symbolism, the media can slip into the dysfunctional areas of their craft. Religion news coverage is fraught with perils for journalists, especially when they attempt to report the supernatural and interpret private claims for their public audience. Journalism scholar Stewart M. Hoover writes: "The question becomes once again how well journalism is doing in identifying and interpreting the private languages of religion in the public square."[7]

In addition to the media's "functions," scholars have also recognized that journalism plays a role in helping to create the "myths" and "legends" of our culture. In fact, several reporters covering the Elian story called it "the stuff of myth and legend."[8] The story line involves familiar symbols of an innocent child fighting against the powerful and incorporates traditional values of justice and freedom, all of which create a "larger than life" persona who gives faith and hope to a

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[6] Many articles and books discuss the four functions of the press. For one source, see Werner J. Severin and James W. Tankard, Jr., *Communication theories: Origins, Methods, and Uses in the Mass Media,* 5th ed., (New York: Longman, 2001); chapter 15.

[7] Stewart Hoover, "Religion In Public Discourse: The Role of the Media," Center for Mass Media Research: University of Colorado, Boulder, 1994, 52.

[8] For one example see, Crocker Snow, Jr., "Boy from the sea: Elian Gonzalez suffers worst nightmares of immigrant experience." *The Worldpaper, WorldSources Online, Inc.* May 1, 2000.

fractured and suffering community – "a contemporary Caribbean John D'Arc."[9] Several scholars have documented how the journalism of the Old West helped create the mental images we have of Jesse James and other villains and heroes of that time. The media help perpetuate modern "myths" as well, such as journalists' "bravery" in the reporting of Watergate.[10]

Journalists as mythmakers reflect the cultural templates that are embedded in our subconscious and influence the ways in which journalists cover certain groups or topics. Media and religion scholar Mark Silk argues that, when covering religion, journalists use familiar story themes that are accepted and understood by the culture. These themes, which he calls "Topoi," were a range of categories that Greek orators would use to connect to people's mindsets, or what were "the culturally approved way of seeing things."[11]

The "Topoi" used by religion news reporters reflect public attitudes as well. He identifies the following Topoi for religion news: Tolerance, hypocrisy, false prophecy; inclusion; supernatural belief; and declension. These themes also fit well with traditional news criteria.

Although many of Silk's Topoi may fit well with the Elian saga, this study concentrates on the supernatural Topoi. According to Silk, journalists are grounded in America's historic Judeo-Christian religious traditions. Therefore, traditional claims are supported and any religious deviancy is thought of as "un-American," a threat to societal norms.

Contrary to many critics, Silk argues that journalists are not secularists. Instead, they are extremely sensitive to religious views and fearful of challenging religious claims. As part of

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[9] Ibid.

[10] For one example, see Caryl Rivers, *"Slick Spins and Fractured Facts: How cultural Myths Distort the News,* (New York: Columbia University, 1996). Also see, Michael Schudson, "Watergate: A study in mythology," *Columbia Journalism Review,* May 1992.

[11] Mark Silk, *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America,* Chapter 12 (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995): chapter 12.

American culture, journalists reflect that culture in their news stories by deferring to religion and religious beliefs. Because of this attitude of deference, journalists usually approach religion news with the values and assumptions that the public shares.[12] In fact, Silk argues that journalists, in some cases, become "God's cheerleaders," and tend toward "heavy religious sentimentality." He writes that uncritical reports on the supernatural outnumber critical stories 46 to 17 percent.[13]

Journalists usually handle supernatural beliefs in two ways. They either report them from their sources without any critical examination, stating the belief or claim and letting the chips fall where they may or they make fun of them under the traditional news criteria of "the unusual" or "novelty." According to the supernatural Topoi, claims of miracles and other supernatural religious occurrences are reported from the familiar stance of the Judeo-Christian heritage, the view that God makes himself – or herself - known through signs and wonders.[14] Surveys have shown that many people believe in God and miracles and journalists reflect the culture by not challenging this embedded belief. As Silk states: "…[T]he mainstream media's approach to the supernatural is more tabloid than skeptical."[15]

Relying on the tradition of "objectivity," reporters sometimes attempt to interpret private beliefs for the public simply by giving "both sides" of the story, interviewing both believers and skeptics. Instead, multiple perspectives may be needed to achieve a balanced account.

Journalism scholar Judith M. Buddenbaum argues that journalists have a difficult task when trying to interpret private religious claims for public consumption, but she maintains that journalists *should* report religious beliefs because these beliefs have public consequences. As she

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[12] Ibid., 141.
[13] Ibid., 128.
[14] Ibid., 121.
[15] Ibid., 122.

wrote: "Beliefs do not exist in a vacuum. They carry with them behavioral implications" that are seen and experienced in the public realm.[16]

Sources are an important factor in reporting religion stories, she says. Although journalistic norms require "objectivity," in many cases, reporters simply rely on quotes from their sources to tell the story.[17] If sources' comments reflect a religious perspective that could be explored deeper – or even outright challenged – reporters may not follow through. There may be a variety of reasons for this from newsroom routines and deadlines to the national religious mindset that Silk referred to, that is that reporters are afraid to challenge private religious claims, at least the ones that fit in with traditional values.

Indeed, challenging any religion can be like "stepping into a cultural minefield," reporter Doug Frantz told an audience at the 1998 Investigative Reporters & Editors' (IRE.) conference. "Merely asking questions will offend the people you are investigating because, at heart, you are challenging something they hold dear to them," Frantz said.[18]

Buddenbaum calls sources' claims of supernatural occurrences "secondary evidence." In legal terms, secondary evidence amounts to hearsay, and Buddenbaum suggests that journalists treat it with "healthy skepticism." [19]

Others also argue that journalists have a hard time reporting on the supernatural. *New York Times'* reporter Wendy Kaminer argues that the news media are too soft on religion and its claims. In an article in *The American Prospect,* she recounts several experiences she had with editors at the *Times* where they refused to print negative comments about religious claims. She said her

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[16] Judith M. Buddenbaum, *Reporting News about Religion*: *An Introduction for Journalists,* (Ames: Iowa State University, 1998): 50.
[17] Ibid., 156.
[18] M.I. Stein, "Investigating Religion: 'A Cultural Minefield." *Editor & Publisher,* (20, June, 1998): 73.

experiences confirmed her beliefs that "mainstream media are unduly fearful of offending the faithful." In America, there is an unspoken rule that "people shouldn't criticize religion," she wrote. Articles on faith and religion in major news magazines routinely omit sources that challenge believers' beliefs, she said and added:

> Reading mass market national magazines – women's magazines as well as the newsweeklies – or watching TV, you find generally uncritical, unquestioning stories about the efficacy of prayer, the existence of angels, the resurgent spirituality of baby boomers....You'll find many similarly unskeptical stories about faith healing, various psychic phenomena or communications with the dead. What you won't find is an equivalent number of articles promoting atheism, or at least presenting it sympathetically.[20]

William Triplett wrote in *American Journalism Review* that: "Journalists do not ask tough questions when reporting stories about miracles or other supernatural phenomenon."[21] Claims of miracles reflect deep cultural and religious beliefs and are thought of as too sensitive to challenge.

Although journalists often "step into the cultural minefield" with religion investigative stories – for example, the exposes of the tele-evangelists in the 1980s and, more recently, the investigation into charges of embezzlement by the Rev. Henry J. Lyons, the leader of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. – the same scrutiny rarely holds true when the faithful make claims about the supernatural.

Triplett argues this approach illustrates that journalists don't attach much importance to religious claims. Investigative stories are hard news stories that sometimes happen to involve religion or religious figures. Stories of miracles and other supernatural occurrences are thought of as "soft" news, popular with readers, but not to be taken seriously. Hence, reporters do not feel the need to question or explore the claims. As Triplett writes: "Religion is not treated as real news and

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[19] Ibid., 159.
[20] Wendy Kaminer, "God's word," *The American Prospect*, January 31, 2000: 6.

its relegation to the lifestyle pages is an example of journalists' unease in treating it like other news subjects."[22]

Triplett examines several accounts of "miracles" such as the report of people seeing the "image of Christ in a spaghetti ad," apparitions of the Virgin Mary, reports of rosaries turning to gold, or religious statues "weeping." He argues that reporters usually treat the story with respect, but offer no critical perspective. They rarely challenge the claims or seek other sources with different views. He adds:

> When it comes to covering the serious world of government, law, war, peace, poverty and such, journalists generally can be trusted to raise questions and demand verification in their quest for the truth in the news. But when it comes to another universe of human interest – stories of the paranormal, of the otherworldly, of things that go bump in the night – they often seem to suspend critical judgments.[23]

He quotes Kenneth Woodward, a former religion writer for *Newsweek,* saying that reporters don't take these kinds of religious claims seriously so they see no need to ask critical questions. Instead, the story is covered as a "kind of comic relief from the real world."

Although religion has received a great deal more attention from the news media over the past 10 years, there is still a lingering perception that religion is "soft" news, more suited to feature stories than hard news reports. Scholars argue that by reducing religion and religious beliefs to nothing more than soft features or supernatural oddities, reporters miss the depth and power religion has to influence public actions.[24]

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[21] William Triplett, "Visitation rites," *American Journalism Review,* September 1993: 33-38.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Stewart M. Hoover makes this point in his book, *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998). Also see Hoover's comments in *Quill,* Susan Willey, "Journalism and Religion," *Quill*, January/February 1996.

Numerous studies have shown that religion remains a difficult topic to cover and, although most studies indicate that journalists are doing better, problems remain. An updated report of the pivotal 1993 Freedom Forum First Amendment study, *Bridging the Gap* found that, although the news and cultural climate is more accepting of religion, the importance assigned to religion story placement in the news has remained unchanged since the 1960s.

A 1999 study by the Garrett-Medill Center for Religion and the News Media found that journalists still have difficulty reporting on spirituality. A content analysis of three newsmagazines, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, Chicago's two major dailies, three Chicago TV stations and the three major networks found that, although there were stories with religion elements – about 11-20 percent of the content – religion and spirituality were not usually their primary focus.[25] Often the focus was international affairs or politics. The study also found that the other stories were "softer news," driven by human interest rather than conflict and that, while not "overtly biased," the stories lacked historical or theological context. Roy Larson, the director of the Garrett-Medill Center, said the study showed that religion stories "cry out for explanatory journalism."[26]

Many studies and articles have addressed the issue of "Faith v. Fact," the idea that journalists are grounded in the tradition of science and objective, verifiable proof, while religions are based on the concept of subjective faith.[27] One way in which the media attempt to overcome this difficulty is to cover religion when it intersects the political agenda. A 2000 study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs tracked the changes of 29 years of media coverage of religion in the

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[25] "Media Coverage of Religion, Spirituality, and Values." Garrett-Medill center for Religion and the News Media, 1999.

[26] John Dart and Jimmy Allen, *Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media,* Update, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 2000, vii.

[27] Several articles and studies have addressed this. For example, see "Faith v. Fact: Press Images of Religion in the United States,: University of Rochester, 1995. This study also found that more context is needed in religion stories.

United States. The study confirmed that journalists are doing a better job at covering religion, but concluded that:

> If there is a single motif in religious news, it is the media's tendency to emphasize the political elements of religious ideas and institutions. Events in this sphere of life tend to make news to the degree that they either intersect with public policy debates or illuminate authority conflicts involving religious institutions.[28]

In *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft,* scholars argue that the United States foreign diplomacy endeavors suffer because of the failure to consider the power of religious beliefs. Barry Rubin argues that, "In many areas of the world, religion should be seen as a central political pillar maintaining the power of any ruler..." [29] In the Elian Gonzalez case, religious beliefs played a significant role on how the Cuban-Americans in Miami saw the highly charged political situation. The stories journalists told about these religious beliefs may have created and legitimized a master narrative that influenced behaviors.[30]

Methodology:

From November 25, 1999 – when the press first published an account of the rescue of Elian Gonzalez – to April 26, 2000 – two days after U.S. immigration officials forcibly removed the boy from the home of his Miami relatives, print journalists wrote thousands of articles on the subject of Elian. By accessing the Westlaw All News database – which indexes all the newspapers on the Dow Jones Stock Exchange – more than 24,500 articles were found under the keyword "Elian." Some of

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[28] S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, Daniel R. Amundson, "Media Coverage of Religion in American: 1969-1998. The Center for Media and Public Affairs, Washington, D.C., 2000.

[29] Barry Rubin, "Religion and International Affairs," in *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft,* eds. Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson. (New York: Oxford University, 1994) :20-34.

[30] In their book, authors Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum argue that both religion and the media provide narratives that define us as a nation and a people. These narratives can – and do – influence behavior and opinion. *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations,* (Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1996): 14.

these were duplicates from wire stories, but the sheer number of articles suggests that this news story was a popular one with the news media in the United States – and other countries as well.

To explore how the press played the "God angle" in the Elian Gonzalez story, the database was searched using the keywords "Elian and God." More than 1,400 articles were retrieved. After reviewing these articles, it was found that many simply cited a passing reference to "God," such as a source thanking God for bringing the boy safely to shore. To further limit the sample, the database was searched again retrieving only those articles that linked "Elian" and "God" within 10 words. This reduced the sample to 258 stories during the time period noted.

These stories were then scanned again for references to God and any religious symbolism. All stories that merely mentioned "God," as in "thanks be to God," were eliminated from the sample as were duplicate wire stories that ran in several newspapers the same day. Editorials, columns and other opinion pieces were separated from the sample and considered as a separate unit of study.

Because Westlaw provides no archival retrieval access for *The New York Times* database, the newspaper's archives were searched via Lexis/Nexis Academic Universe, which retrieved six stories using the key words and limitation pattern of "Elian w/10 God."

Of the documents retrieved, there were a total of 72 articles – 17 editorials or opinion columns and 55 news stories – that made explicit or implicit references to God and/or religion and Elian. Of these articles, 21 dealt directly and explicitly with God, religious faith and religious symbolism.

This study does not claim to examine all the news stories that dealt with the "God angle" in the Elian Gonzalez story. For example, several stories discuss the Santeria religious beliefs in the

Cuban-American community, but do not refer specifically to "God" and therefore were not retrieved under the sample criteria.

Three separate units of analysis were performed. These include: Sample 1: The 34 news stories with only minor references to God and religious symbolism; Sample 2: The 21 stories that focused directly on the religious imagery and sample 3: The 17 editorials and opinion columns. The articles were reviewed to determine patterns of focus and the types of references made to God and religious symbolism.

Using an inductive emergent qualitative methodology, coding charts were created to log the references and discern patterns of coverage. Through coding, the data can be organized and emergent themes noted. One scholar called coding "an emergent, open-ended and creative activity."[31] Yet coding is not entirely subjective either. The analysis is grounded in the scholarly literature as well as the text – or news articles – itself.

Robert K. Yin argues that qualitative research cannot provide statistical generalizations, nor even suggest a "representative" case. He suggests that qualitative searchers generalize findings to theory.[32] Indeed, some scholars argue that theory generation is one of the primary benefits of a case study.[33] Theoretical generalization offers other scholars new interpretations and concepts or new perspectives. The purpose of this study is to shed light into how journalists report on "God" and religion as well as the supernatural religious claims of their sources.

The following research questions were created for this study.

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[31] John Lofland and Lyn H. Lofland, *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, 3d ed., (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1995): 191.

[32] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Designs and Methods*, 2d ed., (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994).

[33] Feagin, et al., *A Case for the Case Study*, 13-14. The authors write that quantitative research has most often been used to generate "low-level" generalization from "inherited theory," while qualitative research often generates new ideas and innovative interpretations.

1. Recognizing the difficulties of translating private religious claims into public understanding, how did journalists handle supernatural religious claims voiced by their sources and what sources were used?

2. Because journalists follow the tradition of "objectivity" when reporting news and, therefore, do not express their own opinions, how, and in what ways, does the editorial and column sample differ from the news articles in discussing supernatural religious claims?

3. Because religion shapes, and is shaped by, culture, what, if any, kind of evidence is there in the sample that provides sufficient context to link supernatural religious claims to a broader cultural and/or political frame?

Findings

The news articles published for a few days after Elian's rescue had only fleeting references to "God." And, for a few days after the event, the story waned. But the image of a five-year-old child surviving a tempest sea crossing would eventually draw reporters back. As Joan Konner wrote in an article about Princess Diana's death: "...you have the stuff of ledes and legends. The story is a prize in the hard news sweepstakes."[34] So, too, was the Elian story.

It should be noted that, although this study focuses on the religious symbolism and supernatural claims of the Elian Gonzalez story, the "God angle" of the story actually received a only a fraction of the amount of coverage in the overall number of stories about the Elian Gonzalez case. Between November 25, 1999 and April 26, 2000, more than 24,500 articles were noted on the Westlaw database search using the keyword "Elian." Of these, only 1,400 had a slight reference to of "God," and only 258 articles were found to specifically link "Elian and God," a little more than 1 percent of the total story sample. The percentage drops even more with the final sample of 72 stories. This is strong evidence that the press paid scant attention to the "God angle" in the Elian story on the whole.

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[34] Joan Konner, "Rewriting the script of history," *Columbia Journalism Review*, (36) no. 4 (November 21, 1997).

This finding is confirmed by an examination of the 34 articles in the sample that only briefly mentioned "God" or other religious imagery or supernatural claims. In this sample, the political frame was dominant. None of these articles mentioned "God" or religious beliefs more than twice and often the references appeared at the end of the story, almost as an after thought.

Several themes emerged after reviewing the 72 articles in the sample. These included:

- Miracles – Dolphins were sent by Jesus to save Elian from the sea; the child was rescued uninjured, with no evidence of dehydration or sunburn and no marks from fish bites; Elian was to have reported that he saw angels keeping him safe; the patron saint of Cuba, Our Lady of Charity, was seen guiding the inner tube, protecting him; Images of the Virgin Mary appeared on a bank building near the Miami house where Elian was staying; Later the image appeared on a mirror at the relative's house as a sign that the Virgin was protecting him.

- Religious metaphors, Imagery – The religious imagery used by Miami Cuban-Americans created numerous metaphors, rich with meaning. Elian was described as another "Moses," set adrift by his mother seeking freedom, found in the waters and destined to set his people free from the evil dictator; He also was described as "a messiah," another freedom theme; Numerous artists in Little Havana depicted Elian in these motifs, surrounded by angels, Jesus, Mary and holy dolphins all to protect this "child of Christ." One painting referred to Elian as "the boy of the dolphins – symbolizing mystical and spiritual creatures.

- Language – The language theme relates to the religious symbolism and imagery above, but it is important to note that *actually calling* someone a specific name is slightly different from using metaphors. For example, Elian was referred to as being "like a Moses," but was actually called "El Milagro," The Miracle Child, "the chosen one," and the "son of Ellegra," the Santeria god who sometimes takes the form of a mischievous child; and there were numerous references by sources to God, Jesus, and Mary (The Lady of Charity, Cuban's patron saint) as well as to Ellegra. Castro is referred to as "Satan," "Herod," "the Pharaoh," and U. S. political figures also assume biblical references such as President Clinton, who was named Pontius Pilate.

- Political – Most of the stories in the first sample were cast primarily a political frame, but even the stories in the second sample provided numerous political references and a few linked the two story frames – religious and political –to provide good context and a better understanding of the meaning behind the religious supernatural claims and symbolism.

Sample 1

The 34 news articles that primarily were written in a political frame and only briefly mentioned the "miracle" elements either evidenced a dismissal tone to the religious claims – something the stories written explicitly in the religious frame, tended not to do – or they failed to provide any critical examination of the claims. A story written by the Global Information Network flatly labeled the story of the dolphins protecting Elian "while angels hovered overhead" as a "myth," but made no further examination of the power of such religious imagery.[35]

One of the stories did provide context surrounding the religious symbolism involved in the Elian story, while, at the same time, tended to dismiss the religious claims. A lengthy story published in *The Washington Post* describes the scene outside Elian's relatives' home in Miami and recounts the "myths" that were surfacing, including the "multiple appearances of the Virgin Mary. "Lunacy," the author writes.[36]

Later in the article, the author reports a new story that is circulating in Little Havana, namely that Cuban dictator Fidel Castro has angered the Santeria saint Eleggua and that the saint has entered the body of Elian. Therefore, Castro must get Elian back to Cuba to save his regime. When the child is returned, Elian will then be sacrificed to the saint. Therefore, it is vital that Elian remain in the United States to literally save his life. The author adds: "It may seem far-fetched, but this fear is out there in the Cuban-community."[37]

The author provides several elements of broadening the story beyond the religious symbolism – Mary apparitions, Elian as a modern-day Moses being saved from the water so he

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[35] Jim Lobe, "Symbol, Saviour, and Six Years Old," Inter Press Service, February 1, 2000.
[36] Gene Weingarten, "The Passion of Elian; Spirited away from a dictator's land, a child surfaces among those who see in him their salvation." *The Washington Post,* April 7, 2000.
[37] Ibid.

could free his people – and linking these elements to the political world of Cuban-Americans and the U. S. government. He writes:

> The most popular poster in Cuban Miami shows Elian caressing a baby Jesus. It carries what might seem to be a puzzling message: Elian Conocio a Cristo. Otros lo Niegan. Elian met Jesus. Others deny him. To many Cubans here, there is no puzzle. Elian, out on the inner tube, was saved by Jesus. Castro and others who dabble in black magic are his enemy. This has emerged as a theme of the fight for Elian, a battle between light and dark. Good and Evil.[38]

Despite its sometime irreverent and opinionated tone, this article *does* challenge many of the religious symbolism to connect these beliefs to the broader, cultural picture. When discussing the cousin – Donato Dalrymple – who rescued Elian – the author dismisses the biblical imagery of him being a "fisherman," to reveal that he really works at a house cleaning company, "cleaning people's floors and toilets." The writer makes fun of the religious imagery and writes:

> If God, for whatever His reasons, has indeed orchestrated each painful development in this story, then there is one point at which he must have stopped, sat back and allowed Himself a little giggle. It was the point at which He inventoried his realm and decided whom, of all the people on Earth, he would choose for the job of plucking young Elian from the sea. Donato Dalrymple is the Fonz.[39]

Although the remainder of stories in the sample explored the political elements and provided some context within that frame, few of the writers challenged any of the religious claims of their sources. Reading through this sample, it was common to see unchallenged quotes such as: "Elian was chosen by God," or "The Virgin Mary saved him from the ocean," or "He is a miracle, a sign from God," or "God sent dolphins to save him." On occasion, sources provided quotes that begged for – as Roy Larson stated – "explanatory" journalism, something more in-depth. None was forthcoming.

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

For example, one article quoted a source saying: "If Elian goes to Cuba, Fidel will turn Elian, who was anointed by God, toward the side of evil.... But, if he stays in the United States, Elian will rise to defeat the Castro regime and bring salvation to Cuba."[40] The writer did not probe this comment nor seek other sources to provide context within the broader political and cultural landscape.

On the whole, the articles in this sample failed to adequately explore the connections among religious beliefs, politics and actions. *The Washington Post* article was the exception, but that article also created a tone of incredibility and made fun of some of the religious stories.

Sample 2

Because the articles in this sample approached the story almost exclusively through a religion frame, the analysis paid particular attention to the kinds of sources reporters tapped for their information. The purpose was to see whether reporters used a variety of sources to either challenge the religious claims or to place them in a broader context. In this sample, "believer" sources – those who reported religious claims – outnumbered the critics – or those who critically examined the claims – nearly 6 to 1. Reporters writing from a religion frame quoted more 60 sources who voiced supernatural religious claims while only tapping 11 sources who critically examined the claims and provided context.

Of the 21 stories, more than half – 11 stories – tapped no other sources other than those who repeated the supernatural religious claims noted in the identified themes. The remainder of the stories each cited either one or two people who provided some context or explanation of the beliefs. This was true no matter how many religious believer sources were used in the story. For example, a

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[40] Roberto Santiago, "Living a 'normal' life in the spotlight: Custody fight, public's attention take emotional toll on 6-year-old." *Austin American-Statesman,* January 31, 2000, A2.

story published April 21, 2000 – the Good Friday just prior to the government's Holy Saturday "raid" at the home of his Miami relatives – the writer quoted seven sources who repeated the themes of miracles, religious imagery and language, but only one source who provided some clarity to the religious claims.

The article quoted a local Cuban-American Roman Catholic priest, saying:

> God has made a gift to us in the community of a miracle, of saving this kid who was two days in the sea and was not hurt. Now the problem is, if God gives us this gift, they want us to return it back to Herod? Herod – Castro – is waiting in Cuba. Pontius Pilate is washing his hands in Washington, and that is President Clinton. And the suffering of this child is the suffering of the Cuban people.[41]

The writer sought only one source outside the Cuban-American community, the auxiliary bishop of Miami, who urged caution about applying religious symbolism to politics. "Hooking a spiritual message to a political agenda can prove to be very shortsighted," he said. The remainder of the sources were Cuban-Americans who continued to cite miracles and "God's will" and God's intervention in Elian case, all without challenge from the reporter.

Only one article tapped more people who challenged or explained the religious claims than sources proclaiming miracles. In an article published April 9, 2000 by the *Times Union* in Albany, N.Y., the author taps more sources that challenge the claims of miracles, but also leans slightly into sarcasm of the religious symbolism. She describes the bank window in Little Havana where Cuban-Americans claimed to see the image of the Virgin as "a dirty window," and dismissed the "image" on the mirror at the relatives' house. She wrote: "The smudged image remained for days until one of the boy's uncles tried to test its genuineness by rubbing it off with Windex."[42]

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[41] April Witt, "Seeing Mystery and Miracles in Miami; For Cuban exiles, Elian's age inspires religious imagery of political salvation." *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2000, A14.
[42] Ellen Yan, "Miraculous visions buoy hopes of exiles." *Times Union*, April 9, 2000. A4.

Yet the author provides some deeper context by explaining the popularity of the biblical symbolism of the Moses story and quotes sources that attempt to provide a deeper meaning to the religious imagery. She quotes Ramon Saul Sanchez, president of Democracy movement.

> To some degree, people identify with the boy because they see their own tragedy in the child. When you are in exile and you do not have your own country, things tend to be elevated to something from God.[43]

Although only one story in the first sample sought sufficient sources to actually examine the meaning behind the religious claims and to supply some context and understanding between the religious beliefs and the political situation, several stories in the second sample were able to provide some deeper insights into this connection.

In general, the articles that depended only on those sources who spoke about God and made supernatural claims failed to provide the depth and context of meaning behind those claims. The articles that focused on these claims, but that also sought out different sources to either challenge or explain the reasons behind the claims did much better at providing depth and better understanding to how religious beliefs were intertwined with the political process in the Elian case. This indicates that, to provide depth and context, a variety of sources should be used.

A few articles in this sample did a particularly good job at creating context and meaning. An article in *The Los Angles Times* examined how "the political and the pious have become inextricably intertwined" framing the account in an historical context that focused on freedom as well as religious symbolism.[44] In an article published in *The Washington Post*, the reporter does not discount the religious claims of believers, but balances these with historical context of the Cuban community in Miami. After quoting sources referring to the miracle of Elian being saved "with no

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[43] Ibid.

scratches and no fish bites" and a reference to Elian being "the Cuban messiah," the reporter wrote: "This prophetic element adds a twist to the political story." The writer continued:

> But this mystical belief in the boy messiah uncovers their more vulnerable side. By identifying so thoroughly with this helpless boy, the community is revealing its desperation and sometimes fatalistic strain. May who fled Cuba when Castro took over in 1959 are entering their 70s and are afraid they'll die before he is deposed.[45]

The reporter quoted a source outside the religious claimants to enhance the explanation. "They're desperately looking for some sign, some announcement, some harbinger, and this boy is it," said Max Castro, a sociologist at the University of Miami who studies Cuban immigrants and is no relation to Fidel." [46]

The reporter also critically examines the story about angels reaching out to Elian as he was floating in the inner tube and links it to Cuban religious mythology concerning the Lady of Charity. The myth tells of the Virgin as a solace of panicked seamen. The ancient cultural religious story says that the Virgin appeared before three fishermen lost at sea, protected them and led them to safety. Without directly challenging the veracity of the sources, the reporter also reports the "facts" regarding Elian's physical condition when he was found, saying that: "…he did in fact show the physical signs of having been lost at sea." The writer also quotes the "fisherman" Dalrymple saying that he isn't really a "fisherman," just a businessman who happened to be fishing that day. The writer clarified the "facts" without making fun of the believers, and placed the religious symbolism in cultural and political context.

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[44] Esther Schrader, " 'Cult of Elian' devotees hold out hope for a miracle belief." *The Los Angeles Times,* April 16, 2000.
[45] Hanna Rosin, "Boy's rescue story takes religious turn in retellings. Angels, dolphins helped, some say." *The Washington Post,* January 22, 2000, A13.
[46] Ibid.

Another story published in T*he Miami Herald* provided some context, but did not link the religious beliefs to politics. This writer, too, drew on research from folklore and mythology to provide a deeper explanation of how different cultures see dolphins as saviors of people lost in the sea, citing legends from as far back as 10,000 B.C. and historical accounts from the time of Aristotle. The reporter interviewed a dolphin behavior specialist as well as religious believers.[47]

Other writers examined another "religious myth" from the Santeria tradition, explaining the religion and its beliefs – "a heady brew of voodoo and Christian beliefs."[48] Stories in *The Washington Times* and *The Miami Herald* examined the Cuban-American's beliefs of Elian as "a son of Eleggua," a Santeria saint. Sources repeated the story that "Fidel Castro was told by Santeria babalaos, or high priests, years ago that a son of Eleggua would be rescued from the ocean and bring about the downfall of his Communist regime."[49] These stories did not include sources other than religious believers and hence there was little context.

Sample 3

Unlike regular news stories, columns and editorials are expected to voice opinion and the 17 articles in the sample did just that. But, unlike the news articles in Sample 2, the columns, overall, failed to provide much depth or context into the religious symbolism. A few of the columns criticized the manner in which Elian was taken from his home with Miami relatives and others were critical of the large amount of media coverage of the case. Three columns blatantly made fun of the religious aspects of the story calling it "loony," arguing that "common sense says it is impossible." One column said the religious situation in the Cuban-American community had evolved into

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[47] Ana Acle, "Dolphins tale the stuff of legends," *The Miami Herald,* January 23, 2000, 1B.
[48] Robert Santiago and Helen Kennedy, "Cult in a frenzy over savior boy." *The New York Daily News,* April 9, 2000.

"hysteria." One columnist suggested that the so-called apparition of the Virgin Mary on the bank window looked more "like a parrot" and suggested the meaning behind the apparition was that there should be a Jimmy Buffett concert.[50]

Silk argues that journalists have a "knowledge problem" when it comes to the supernatural. As he said: "For a non-believer, things like miracles or apparitions have no basis in reality. Why then should you cover them except maybe to make fun of them?"[51]

The majority of the columns simply mentioned religious comments without question, but three of the editorials attempted to examine the meaning behind the religious symbolism and supernatural claims and were able to connect them to a political or cultural theme. The writers expressed concern that the government had allowed the situation to deteriorate. One writer recounted the imagery of Elian as a Cuban Moses and cited the connection to Santeria beliefs as he warned of the potential for disaster:

> It may all seem way over the top, but by giving these stories room and time to flourish, it has created an immeasurably messier situation....The Elian case no longer is a mere custody case. It no longer is the political boom hoped for by Castro or Florida's opportunistic politicians. It has now become a religious frenzy, an ecstatic fever just waiting for martyrs to appear.[52]

Bill Tammeus of *The Kansas City Star* also urged caution when dealing with strong religious beliefs, especially supernatural omens. He wrote:

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[49] Tom Carter, "Santeria ceremony held to guard boy." *The Washington Times.* April 3, 2000; also, Aileen Dodd, "Elian a bridge linking rival faiths, *The Miami Herald,* April 10, 2000: 1B

[50] Patrick Ogle, "Divine message for Elian or Parrotheads?" *The Miami Herald,* April 7, 2000: 7S. Also see, "Reunite Elian, dad as soon as possible," editorial, *The State Journal-Register,* April 7, 2000.

[51] Silk, *Unsecular Media,* 119.

[52] Achy Obejas, "Elian opera is going beyond odd." *The Chicago Tribune,* April 2, 2000.

> But the metamorphosis of Elian Gonzalez into a divine child gives us a chance to think about the distressing human tendency to enlist God as a political ally in any cause, both high-minded and ignoble. For clearly some people have sought to turn Elian into God's anti-Communist messiah....The hard lesson is that we attach divine purpose to humans and merely human events at our peril. Was David Koresh the Lord's prophet as he claimed? Many of his Branch Davidian followers believed so and – due to run-amok government – paid for that false allegiance with their lives.[53]

One column provided context and explanation into the power of religious beliefs of Santeria and Catholicism, linking these to religious and political freedom. One Santeria rite claims that child saviors always arrive by sea. Therefore, adherents of Santeria – and some Roman Catholic Cuban-Americans as well – believed that Castro had lost favor of Eleggua and would fall from power if the boy was not be returned.

This combination of theology and politics is a powerful mix, one that the media seemed to miss. He added:

> Of all the circumstances surrounding Elian, perhaps the least understood is the religious significance place on the shipwrecked boy by both Cuban exiles in Florida and Cubans at home....It explains the potency of feelings in Miami and Cuba, where Santeria priests are important enough to get equal time with high government officials.[54]

Discussion

"Beliefs," by their very nature are subjective, yet they also are grounded in fact.[55]Surveys tell us that it is a "fact" that many people "believe" in miracles. And therein lies the journalist's dilemma. There may be no doubt that a source truly *believes* what he or she said and it is a fact he

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[53] Bill Tammeus, "Misusing Elian's story for political gain," *The Kansas City Star,* February 13, 2000.
[54] Norman A.Lockman, "Religion sways some who fight to keep Elian," *The Wilmington News Journal,* April 10, 2000.
[55] Buddenbaum also makes this point. See *Reporting News about Religion,* 158.
[55] Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm. *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

or she actually said it. So the journalist feels free to quote the person without challenging the statement. Simple attribution is viewed as sufficient. Of course, numerous media scholars have attacked this reasoning, arguing that the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s gave ample evidence that this kind of "objective" reporting was not "objective," but in reality distorted the truth. The 1947 Hutchins Commission wrote in *A Free and Responsible Press* that journalists must go beyond reporting the "facts" and report the "truth about the facts." [56]

In this study it seems clear that, despite the political frame placed on the story by the majority of journalists, the actions of the Cuban-American community were driven at least as much by their religious beliefs as their political ones. Had more reporters taken the time to examine the symbolism and meanings behind these beliefs, and noted the strength of the religious connection early in the story development, journalists would have done a better job at "monitoring the culture," and perhaps altered the outcome of the story itself.

In general, reporters either failed to recognize the significance of the "God angle" in the story or – once the "religion oddity" angle surfaced – failed to explore the meaning and the implications of the Cuban-Americans' religious beliefs on federal immigration and foreign policy. Reporters tended to frame the story as either a hard news political drama or as a softer news religious feature. But when the Miami Cuban community framed the story, they did so in a very serious religious/political frame, the archetypal story line of the battle of Good v. Evil – God and Satan. Once the story was seen in this light, lines were drawn in concrete and any compromise was unlikely. As one sociologist said:

> These kinds of religious manias are nothing new in history. But what's unique here is the combination of the religious mania with a political crusade. You've got believers and you've got manipulators in this cult of Elian. When you put the two together what you get is the devil Fidel and the angel Elian and you cannot consider sending the angel back into the devil's lair.[57]

This source provided deeper context, yet most of the articles depended solely on simplistic quotes from believers. By blithely quoting people praising God and proclaiming miracles and failing to examine other explanations or to probe the deeper meaning, reporters treated the religious angle of the story more as soft, feature news rather than as having direct – and important – bearing on political actions. Buddenbaum argues that much of what is wrong with religion reporting is the failure to find sources that are "accurate, credible and meaningful."[58]

Although some of the stories that dealt primarily with the religion angle did examine the political-cultural links and seek at least one other source to provide an opposing view, most failed to probe deeply enough into the connections between faith, politics and behavior. The same held true for most of the editorials. Instead, reporters tended to approach the religion angle as an "oddity," a strange turn of events that happened to project itself onto the political problem. Rarely did reporters recognize that the religious belief system might be as important and influential as the political.

The "God angle" in the Elian story was more than "magical" claims, as some journalists labeled the religious symbolism. The stories were ground in deeply held religious beliefs that encompassed rich symbolism and created meaning for the Cuban-Americans. The supernatural religious claims, while they may have seemed odd to many people, may well have influenced the behavior of the Miami relatives and their supporters to "dig in" and refuse to release Elian to

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[57] Esther Schrader, " 'Cult of Elian' devotees hold out hope for a miracle belief." *The Los Angeles Times,* April 16, 2000.
[58] Buddenbaum, *Reporting News about Religion,* 155.

authorities – people they saw as having no authority over a "divine" child. Unless reporters understood that, an important element of the story was missed.

This study shows that reporters must not only recognize the religious dimensions in hard news stories that affect public policy and foreign affairs, but also should seek numerous and credible sources to examine the meaning and implications of those beliefs on public actions. The study confirmed much of the criticism from scholars and studies that argue that reporters fail to examine the implications of "spiritual" and "religious" belief.

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